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The Process of Designing and Analysing a Qualitative Study into Multiple Work Integrated Learning Experiences

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Abstract

Universities are forever looking for the perfect Work Integrated Learning (WIL) model: the one that gives students the best chance of a graduate job, fits in the ever changing needs of a diverse student population and can be delivered with minimum administrative overheads to the institution. Researchers at the University of Huddersfield have been exploring psychological factors related to WIL as part in a worldwide study led by Drysdale (Drysdale *et al.*, 2010). The initial analysis of our UK quantitative data set indicated that the number of different WIL experiences a student undertook significantly increased self-reported measures of hope, agency and goal-orientation. The aim of this qualitative study is to explore a variety of student placement experiences in more depth to tease apart experiential aspects of their placements and how these relate to the constructs identified as significant in the previous study. This obviously has strategic implications for the way we deliver WIL both at our institution and across the sector.

The use of qualitative techniques aims to move the focus on to the experiential aspects of students' work placements through focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews. The interviews will potentially use a reflective tool to facilitate dialogue about the abstract concepts measured in the survey. This study will investigate how students relate their work placement experiences to softer skill development identified by our survey research, and how these skills are built up across multiple placements. Was it a case of 'The more, the merrier'?

This paper will describe the methodological challenges faced in the design and analysis of our research, including how to facilitate in-depth reflection on work placements, and how to anchor broad concepts such as 'hope' and 'agency' to specific experiences encountered in the working environment.

The identification of an effective method of reflection and analysis of the experiential details of work placements will allow the student voice to be heard, and illuminate important aspects of their experiences. This could then be used to facilitate teaching and learning in this area.

Keywords: work integrated learning, placement, internship, qualitative

Searching for the perfect model

The search for the perfect model of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) should be sensitive to a range of factors. How can models of WIL dovetail with the ever-changing needs of a diverse range of students? What gives students the best chance of subsequent employment? What features of WIL allow models to be delivered with minimum administrative overheads? An examination of these issues needs to be grounded in a firm evidence base, and this can only be successful if students' on-the-ground experiences in practice are taken into account.

A worldwide study led by Drysdale has been exploring the psychological factors related to work integrated learning (Drysdale *et al.*, 2011). A survey undertaken by researchers at the University of Huddersfield formed part of the international project, and initial analysis suggested that the more work-related experiences a student had, the more hope, agency and intrinsic goal-orientation they reported (Purdie *et al.*, 2011). At Huddersfield, funding was secured for a follow-up qualitative study to explore student placement experiences in more depth. The study is taking an overarching view of work integrated learning across multiple academic schools and WIL models. The study measured the actual number and duration of each student's WIL experiences, with some being as little as a few days, to many months. The comparison was between the effects of one WIL experience and multiple (or many) WIL experiences. Initial analysis from our qualitative study suggests the importance of

student's ability to compare different placement settings helps to facilitate their learning. The study hopes to tease out the experiential details of learning on placement, and from this we hope to draw strategic implications for the way that WIL is delivered in our own institution, and across the sector.

Traditional models of work integrated learning

At the University of Huddersfield our strategy map (University of Huddersfield, 2008a) has a core aim of producing 'enterprising and employable students'. This is further supported by our Teaching and Learning Strategy (University of Huddersfield, 2008b) which states, 'all courses to have work related elements'. Our strapline is 'Inspiring tomorrow's professionals' and links to the professions are very strong. In the UK the predominant model of WIL has been the sandwich degree, where periods of work experience are 'sandwiched' inside academic studies, the most common form being a third year in industry or commerce within a four year degree. This model works well in business, engineering, science, IT and art and design and as a university we offer this model of WIL. In many cases the student effectively works as an employee for a year. Usually a final report is required by the university and occasionally this is an accredited part of the degree route. Often this work is supported by placement offices, which in many ways work like recruitment agencies, advertising vacancies and asking students to apply. Many courses offer alternatives to the traditional sandwich course in the form of short placements and also what is known as service learning for example volunteering for a service organisation (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher & Pretto, 2008).

Following the Browne review (Browne, 2010), taught undergraduate fees are rising dramatically to around £9000 (approximately \$14,000 US) per year from 2012 onwards. However whilst most institutions have set their fees for taught courses, the fees for a sandwich (third) year of work experience, which will not take place under this new regime until 2014, are widely unknown. The Wilson Review of Business and Industry Collaboration (Wilson, 2012) suggests that these work placements are so fundamental to the student experience and future economic growth that they should be set no higher than £1000 a year.

Models for WIL in professional placements are quite different to this. Many professions require studying a professional body accredited course at a UK university – for example this occurs in a range of professions including nursing, social work and teaching. Each professional body has its own approach which is strictly enforced across the sector. Placement experiences are tightly linked to the outcomes, skills and competencies expected of the trainee professional. Normally a workplace mentor supports the student. Students on these courses tend to have less choice about placement. The work of the staff in the placement offices is to facilitate the matching of an individual student's learning outcomes with the available placements. This will also be based upon the skills and competencies that the individual needs to develop. Access is to a range of equivalent experiences. This does not mean that all experiences are similar, though their learning outcomes can be.

The above two models predominate at the University of Huddersfield and across the UK. However there are other types of placements. For example on courses such as Youth and Community Studies, placements can be continual throughout the course, so every week students may both go to work and attend University. On courses such as History and Politics, students may undertake a six week placement to gain an insight into the world of work, which may not be inside a 'traditional' business. There may be some similarity between these approaches and that of service learning as discussed in the Australian Scoping Study for WIL (Patrick et al., 2008). In fact Service-learning may also provide a platform for examining options that students have in pursuing multiple WIL.

The development of skills for employability

The research team's previous findings (Purdie *et al.*, 2011) suggest that students who experience placements have significantly higher hope, confidence in attaining their goals and lower test anxiety than their non-placement peers, consistent with extant evidence (Allen & van der Velden, 2002; Crebert *et al.*, 2002; Cuzzi *et al.*, 1996). The research team discovered that the more work related experiences a student had seemed to have a cumulative effect on several psychological factors. In particular more hope, intrinsic goal orientation, confidence in attaining their goals and academic self-efficacy were reported. The survey looked at both distinct placement experiences and multiple work related activities such as voluntary work, experiential learning and internships. The multiple work-related activities appeared to influence a greater range of psychological factors, including positive self concept and self esteem. This is in contrast to previous evidence to suggest there are no significant

differences in self-efficacy between students who pursue sandwich placements and those who pursue multiple placements (Cuzzi *et al.*, 1996). The research team therefore wanted to explore whether our findings could be substantiated by further in-depth qualitative research. They therefore gained funding to explore work experience and the development of softer skills which could include communication, team management, delegating, appraising, presenting and motivating.

The qualitative project

Many existing qualitative studies of student work experience are discipline-specific, focusing on fields such as nursing (McKenna *et al.*, 2010), occupational therapy (Fieldhouse & Fedden, 2009), applied science (Coll *et al.*, 2001) and information technology (Holt *et al.*, 2004). One important focus for the Huddersfield qualitative project was to maintain an overview of the features of WIL across a variety of diverse degree programmes, rather than focusing on role-specific elements of placements. This set some specific challenges in terms of the research design, with implications across three stages of the project: recruitment, interviewing and analysis.

Keeping the project's aims in mind

The project aims to investigate broad aspects of learning and personal development, and the students' sense of progression across work placements, rather than comparing task-specific aspects of job roles. Recruitment of participants across a range of subject areas is crucial to forming insights into issues common across disciplines. Recruitment, which is still in progress, is focusing on students from a range of backgrounds – from arts and humanities, business, education and engineering to information technology and applied sciences.

To retain a focus on the broad, cross-disciplinary aspects of work integrated learning, the research team initially considered running a focus group (Kandola, 2012). The idea of a focus group was to obtain the views of students across a range of courses at the same time, so they could compare and contrast their experiences with one another. The researcher would be able to identify a range of common issues in preparation for the individual interviews. However when the project started it was clear that the objectives the project team had set themselves and the short contract of the research assistant were incompatible. Given that organising and running focus groups can be complex and time consuming the decision was made instead to utilise individual interviews to pilot our research.

The first interview was undertaken using Kelly's repertory grid technique (Fransella, 2005). This method has its roots in personal construct psychology (PCP) (Kelly, 1955), and is an approach which investigates how individuals make sense of their world and their identity. The participant was asked to think about the work characteristics of colleagues on placements, and to think about his/her own characteristics in terms of his/her work role at different points along his/her placement journey. Comparative talk about the characteristics of the self and others in the work environment did elicit fundamental perceptions about what made people employable, and easy or difficult to work with, but few links were made between these characteristics and specific experiential episodes on work placements, and the technique drew little talk about the relational aspects of working with others.

Reflecting upon the limitations of the repertory grid for this project, another PCP technique focusing on aspects of personal development – the Salmon Line (King & Horrocks, 2010) – was considered. This technique uses a single line drawn between two concepts to facilitate reflection on how progression occurs from one concept to another. A different tool was developed based on the same premise, but explicitly capturing the temporal aspects of learning from multiple placements: a line labelled 'Before placements' and 'After placements'. In a second pilot interview, another participant was asked to denote work placements underneath the line and key moments in learning and personal development above the line at the points in the placement journey at which they occurred. This proved to be successful in eliciting data addressing the projects aims. The project team agreed that this approach should be trialed in our research.

A series of individual interviews from a range of subject areas and WIL models are in the process of being conducted. The initial project interview yielded promising data on concepts such as teamwork, student identity, the facilitation of personal development through sensitive management by employers, and the student's criteria for evaluating placement experiences. A preliminary analysis of our findings shows many interesting examples of the skills that develop over multiple placements such as adapting to different types of team environments and understanding the organisational culture in context.

Focusing on the bigger picture

Semi-structured interviews can yield a large volume of textual data, and the principles of thematic analysis are based on looking for patterns within the data. Analysis can go beyond describing a set of data by interpreting the themes or patterns which arise in connection with specific research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Our qualitative analysis will focus on investigating student experiences of multiple work integrated learning opportunities, and their influence on learning, personal development, and preparation for work.

An in-depth thematic analysis of the interviews will be carried out based on the principles of template analysis (King, 2012). Template analysis is a technique which can accommodate an *a priori* focus on specific aspects of the research agenda – in this case, on the overarching issues connected with learning and personal development which are shared by students across diverse subject areas. Template analysis involves the development of a coding structure (a template) from initial interview transcripts which is then applied to subsequent interview data and modified as new themes or subtleties in the data come to light. The initial template will be constructed with a main focus on overall issues, rather than the task-based concepts connected with specific job roles, and this resulting focus will be taken forward in the analysis of subsequent data. The technique is flexible enough to allow for the inclusion of issues related to job roles where they may have a bearing on several issues at a later stage: details can be coded as low level themes in a coding hierarchy, and can be subsumed under higher level themes as the analysis progresses. An added benefit of this technique in team-based research is the possibility of sharing analytic findings at an early stage, when the initial template has been constructed, and keeping the team updated with information each time the coding structure is revised.

Implications for the facilitation of teaching and learning

The purpose of our research is to explore how WIL, and in particular multiple WIL placements, impact upon the student learning experience. In particular we are interested in how soft skills develop over placements. However what we hope to achieve is a deeper understanding of how learning and preparation for work occurs throughout WIL. Our findings are not about advocating changes to current WIL models, as the principles and practicalities have been developed over many years. However we hope that our findings will challenge Teaching and Learning practitioners to consider our research when planning WIL delivery. For example should our findings advocate multiple WIL, this challenges us to find ways to blend the best WIL models for our existing students. These could include encouraging sandwich degree students to gain relevant part-time jobs or internships as part of their course, which would have many of the benefits of multiple WIL without the overhead costs.

Conclusion

The purpose of our research is to relate work experience to the development of softer skills, by facilitating dialogue and reflection about the psychological concepts identified from our quantitative study. This paper has explored the process of designing and analysing a qualitative study into multiple WIL experiences. It has explored our pilot work with personal construct psychology techniques and the modifications developed from our trials. An outline of the template analysis planned has also been covered. Our research is now underway and our techniques are developing further. Further reflection on our methods will take place once our study is completed.

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