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Making Sandwich Placements Count within Huddersfield University Business School

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Abstract

Sandwich placements have a long standing tradition and engender wide spread support from within the Huddersfield University Business School (HUBS) and whilst assessed, placements are non-graded and the mark is not used within the final degree calculation. As part of a 2 year Work Based Learning (WBL) assessment and credit project, this paper outlines the work undertaken to construct a model for awarding academic credit for the sandwich year.

The research framework has included questionnaires directed to those students returning from placements into their final year of study in 2007/2008, current Year 4 students (i.e. those who completed placements during 2005/2006) and interviews with a number of HUBS academic staff, all of whom are involved with placement students to some significant extent.

Analysis of the data reveals a high proportion (88%) of students on placement felt that it should 'count' and some of those who did not undertake a placement suggest that they would have been encouraged to undertake a placement if this was the case. In terms of the development on placement, there is little doubt of the depth and breadth of experiences, with extensive evidence of developing high level skills both generic and specific to the role or organisation. Academics, whilst in favour of awarding credit, showed some caution in how to compose an appropriate assessment methodology, and noted issues regarding the comparability of placements and therefore the individual experiences gained.

This paper notes the key need to focus upon reflective learning as central to the assessment framework. It then provides an outline of a revised placement assessment model to be evaluated through a pilot scheme with a student cohort commencing placement in the summer of 2007, considering especially issues relating to credit value and its relevance and impact on the actual degree classification. This will then provide the necessary research to inform and support a wider 'roll-out' of the revised framework for 2008/2009.

Introduction

"The notions of 'knowledge in action (Barnett 1997) or active intellectual reflection (Schon 1996) have begun to break down the barriers between what is academic and what is vocational". (Portwood and Costley 2000) who continue that the idea that the workplace are sites of learning and that universities are not "the sole generators and maintainers of knowledge" is not a new concept. In supporting such views here in HUBS and elsewhere in other institutions, sandwich placements have been a key component in many undergraduate courses and can be viewed as a major work-based element of a degree programme.

Historically, the view held with HUBS is that whilst providing a very meaningful experience, for example in enhancing a students' employability and developing relevant and transferable business skills, the experience should be one that enables the student to undertake the placement with minimal pressure to produce assessed work. So at present, although the placement is subject to a form of summative assessment, placements are non-graded and the mark is not used within the final honours degree calculation.

Despite the almost inherent and unquestioned support for the concept of student placements, the reality is that within HUBS, the University and indeed nationally, there has been a decline in placement take-up. HEFCE sets this figure at a fall from 22,850 to 17,810 between 1999 and 2005 (HEFCE, 2006 UVAC Conference Proceedings). It is noted that key factors leading to this decline include: an increased number of females on Business related course, a large number of ethnic minorities, mature

students with family commitments, and an increasing the unwillingness/inability to travel/re-locate, all of which relates to wider changes in the student profile and student access to HE.

This then adds a further dimension to our research enquiry – what is it that makes placements attractive as learning experience from a students’ perspective? And how might we increase the attractiveness of the placement in terms of its relationship to the University-based curricula and learning experience?

The aim of this paper then, and more generally of the action-research being described within this paper, is to:

- Consider student views on the nature of the learning achieved within placements and the relative value of that learning vis-à-vis existing University-based academic modules;
- Similarly consider academic views on the learning and the relative value of the learning achieved within student placements;
- Outline current progress towards a revised assessment model and framework which reflects the relative value of WBL through the process of standard accreditation towards the honours classification.

Work based learning and sandwich placements

An initial question might be: why undertake placements at all?

Enhanced employability is one benefit from undertaking a placement, research by Bowes and Harvey (1999) suggests that those students with 12 months work placement are more likely to find employment more quickly and in their preferred field than those students without employment experience, with almost 70% of sandwich graduates being employed 6 months after graduation. The placement thus plays a key and vital role in developing skills for employment some of which, whilst can be taught in a classroom environment, can only be put to real practice in the workplace.

Accrediting the placement, basing the final degree mark on a percentage calculation of the assessed work can provide the challenge and motivation to encourage students to reflect on their work, learn from the experience and link this to academic studies. It can also assist the student and employer to set learning goals and targets which will enable development of key competencies, skills and personal development.

The alternative view, and one that has in part been endorsed by recent and current practice within HUBS, is that work performance may suffer if the quest to accumulate academic credit results in a lack of focus on their actual placement work. This is supported by McLernon and Hughes (2004) who note that awarding academic credit for WBL should be on the basis of knowledge development through reflection and adjustment, again stressing the reflective nature of the learning as individuals being able to acquire knowledge by learning “And then of analysing, developing and synthesising that knowledge and finally applying this synthesised knowledge”. McLernon and Hughes (2004). What is being assessed within work-based learning should focus upon the understanding, articulation and application of learning without being constrained by academic accreditation.

There is also a view that placements are not comparable as there is such a wide variety in the type of company and organisational setting in which students are placed. Workplaces can differ considerably in the ability to offer learning settings due to the varying nature of their complexity, insularity, power relations and the “nature of their boundaries with academic contexts of learning and knowledge production” Brennan & Little (2006). Evans et al (2002) emphasise the contextual nature of the learning at work and that a particular form of learning that works well in one context may not do so in others “where they are undermined by other aspects of the employment relationship, for example job insecurity, work intensification and absence of employee voice”. These could thus form a barrier to learning and may prove a disadvantage to students who have additional pressures on them in relation to the environment, department or company they find themselves in.

It is however suggested it is not the experience itself but the learning derived from that experience that is important (Frame and Dattani, 2000 and Hill, 2004) and assessment is based upon students’ articulation of learning not upon the ‘quality’ or the conditions of the experience itself but the quality of the reflection of learning. The focus is on the quality of the reflection of learning and so “it is

possible to produce an excellent portfolio – and get a first class mark from a ‘mediocre’ experience”. Hill (2004). Equally the reverse may be true: students may secure a placement within an organisation or setting with a rich diversity of *potential* learning and experiential inputs but the student themselves fail to effectively draw upon these experiences and/or understand, appreciate and reflect upon what this learning is or means.

In order to learn from the workplace the support mechanisms need to be in place to assist and develop students in their ability to develop strategies for planning, reflecting and developing their learning.

What is the appropriate credit value?

There are a number of challenges in determining the relative academic value of WBL:

- a) To what extent the WBL has some element of uniqueness and adds to the existing academic learning i.e. to ensure the WBL does not merely duplicate other academic learning and experiences.
- b) Separating the contextual position and impact from the individual learning and student development (Evans et al (2002)). In essence, to what extent does the quality of the student placement materially impact and influence the quality of the learning experience?
- c) Enabling placement students to reflect and articulate on their WBL i.e. their skills, knowledge, attitudes and emotions according to the framework outlined by Frame and Dattani (2000)
- d) Consideration of the relative quantity and value of WBL vis-à-vis an academic learning experience, which in practice amounts to what modular credit value can be given and at what level (McLernon and Hughes (2004))
- e) Establishing effective and robust evaluation and assessment processes to provide for the accreditation and ‘award’ of WBL-based modular credits.
- f) Awarding credit that is representative in terms of quality and quantity of the learning obtained (McLernon and Hughes (2004))

None of these challenges are insurmountable and indeed much progress has been made with each, but they remain areas of concern and necessary consideration.

Research methodology

A questionnaire was distributed to students from two departments who attended the options day on 27 April 2007 to select modules for their final year of study. 32 completed questionnaires were received, 21 of which were from students currently on placement (from a total of 75 placement students)

The questionnaires were designed to understand students’ views on using the placement year towards the final degree mark and were piloted on recent graduates/final year students. For those students who did not undertake a placement we wanted to understand the reasons why and whether the proposed scheme would have increased the likelihood of them applying for a placement.

Whilst the questionnaire would provide the views of students, it was also necessary to determine how students valued the placement and the learning and development they achieved as a result of the placement. Therefore a sample from a group of Year 4 (final year) BA Business Studies students, some of whom were taking specialist routes such as a CIPD, was selected and an ‘open-format’ questionnaire schedule was issued which was completed and returned via e-mail and then followed up by further brief telephone interviewing for further clarification and elaboration of certain key points. This enabled a greater exploration of the types of work, level of responsibility, skills and competencies developed along with an understanding of the level of articulation of this development students are able to show, reflection and articulation of learning being of paramount importance within work-based learning assessment.

The sample cohort had undertaken their placement year during 2005-06 and were subject to the research investigation almost one year after the completion of their placement. This was considered appropriate as it provided for more considered reflection of the impact and value of the placement as well as comparison and reflection on their final year academic progress.

Given that historically within HUBS the view was that students had enough to cope with without the additional pressure of further assessment, 10 members of academic staff who had experience of placement visiting tutor role were interviewed during March 2007 to understand the academic view of the level and credit value for placements and how they felt it would affect the student both in considering a placement and when on placement.

Research findings - comparative models of placement and accreditation

A. Other institutions Business Schools

Contact was made with 36 HE Institutes' Business Schools to determine firstly if they offered courses with sandwich placements and if so whether the assessment was used in the calculation of the final degree mark. Out of the responses received the following information was collated:

- 8 Business Schools awarded academic credit with between 10 and 12.5% of final mark used; 4 Business Schools gave separate awards in the form of work based learning type internally validated awards;
- 2 Business Schools gave separate awards plus accredited towards final mark;
- 8 Schools did not use the sandwich year assessment in the final mark calculation nor gave a separate award
- 12 Business Schools did not offer placements.

B. Huddersfield University Business School (HUBS)

During term 1, all second year students seeking placements attend placement workshops run by HUBS placement unit to provide assistance with CV and application letter preparation, interview techniques and general placement application advice. All students register on MaPPiT once CVs are received and this enables access to vacancies and other related information.

The current sandwich placement bears 120 S level credits and would this is shown on the transcript as a Sandwich award. The placement year is assessed through tutor and supervisor appraisals and a tutor marked placement report which is submitted in September and developed through encouraging students to maintain a placement logbook/diary which is reviewed through tutor visits. There is no grading of the placement, it is a pass or a fail and those students who do not pass the placement year, which would happen in only extreme cases, would receive an ordinary degree award.

The assessment mechanisms are therefore in place already using the standard type methods of assessing work-based learning.

C. School of Computing and Engineering, University of Huddersfield

The model which has been in use for the past 10 years within the School of Computing and Engineering is two 60 credit modules whilst on placement which are graded and are used in the final mark calculation. In terms of the assessment, the tools used within this model and similar to those used within HUBS

Research findings – current year 2 and year 3 student perspectives

Questionnaires were sent to all students who would be commencing their final year in September 2007. Of the 32 responses received, 21 were currently on placement, the others on year 2 of the course who would not be undertaking a placement as part of the degree.

A. *Students on placement*

86% of those students on placement stated that the placement should be used in the calculation of the final degree mark. A recurring theme was that the placement is valuable experience which requires a lot of hard work and therefore should be acknowledged and rewarded. Other comments included “it would have had more value” and “would be an added incentive to do well” and “push people to try harder on placement”.

Those students who felt the placement should not count cited the reason being the variety of the placements and the differing experiences making 'fairness' of marking difficult. One student commented that perhaps there should be a choice as to whether it would count

In terms of the weighting of the placement, 72% of students thought that it should count as 1/3rd of the final mark, 28% suggested less than 1/3rd and preferred methods of assessment were employer and visiting tutor appraisals, logbooks, assignments and presentations. It is interesting that employer appraisals scored most highly suggesting students feel this is the most effective way of assessing their performance in the workplace.

95% of responses stated that the current level of tutor contact/tutor visits would not be appropriate if the placement was to be used to calculate the final degree mark. This however may reflect the current lack of knowledge of how exactly the placement will be assessed, but it is an area that will be monitored through the pilot scheme.

For those students on placement, 1 respondent did state that they would be less inclined to undertake a placement, this however is a retrospective view

B. Students without sandwich year

It was important for the research to discover the effect of the proposed placement module on the decision to undertake a placement. Given the declining take up rate of placements, would it make a difference to the decision? For non-sandwich students 70% stated that the likelihood of them selecting a sandwich placement would have increased and 30% said it would stay the same. Therefore there were no responses of a negative effect on their decision.

The reasons for not undertaking a placement were the wish to study over 3 years instead of 4 (40%), family/personal reasons making placement unviable (30%), having previous work experience (20%) and not being able to secure a placement (10%)

Research findings – current year 4 (post-placement) student perspectives

The sample group were varied in their placement focus, including public and private sector, local and national companies, large corporate businesses and SMEs. In summary the research responses are identified as:

- Houseware retail – trainee supervisor (R1)
- Food manufacturer – HR asst (R2)
- Drinks manufacturer – operations planning (R3)
- Facilities support – design/sales operations (R4)
- Food manufacturer – HR asst (R5)
- Operations support – project/change management co-ordinator (R6)
- Houseware manufacturing/retail – operations asst (R7)
- NHS – HR asst (R8)
- Health training – office manager (R9)

The initial question that was asked was a quite fundamental one of what is was about the placement that stood out for the student. Some of the responses are illuminating:

'The environment, the people I met and the experiences that I was opened up to' (R2)

'The responsibility in the end was huge and I enjoyed this' (R3)

'The highlights of the job were going to site, seeing the finished article and shaking the customers hand ...' (R4)

'I learnt things in my placement that I could never have learned in the basic [academic] 3 years' (R8)

'Doing my placement gave me the drive to try my hardest in my final year' (R8)

The analysis of responses from students in respect of their learning was undertaken using the AKSE framework as used by Frame and Dattani (2000), in which typically, the following learning areas are considered:

Knowledge: product-based, organisational/business structure, job practices and policies, technical areas etc.

Skills: customer exchanges, time management, decision-making, communications, IT, applied numeracy, problem-solving, delegation and planning etc.

Attitudes: self-discipline, responsibility, commitment, adaptability, self-awareness, motivation, politeness and political astuteness, etc.

Emotions: coping with pressure and stress, coping with criticism, work affiliation or isolation, self-esteem, sense of anomie, etc.

The respondents' answers reflect many of these issues:

Knowledge

'I gained important qualifications that will benefit my future e.g. SHL qualified [recruitment assessment system]' (R2)

'I have learnt a lot about the food industry – both inside the business and my perspective as a customer' (R3)

'I have met many suppliers and am aware of many business that I didn't know existed' (R3)

'Within the particular industry, it is very harsh where little mistakes can be very costly' (R7)

'I have a good knowledge of the public health sector ... the NHS works very differently when compared to other private sector organisations' (R8)

'I have a view of working in a small family business' (R9)

Skills

'The best experience was ... being able to change product displays and seeing how customers react and respond' (R1)

'My confidence, presentation, organisation and learning skills have increased dramatically which has also been seen in my university work' (R2)

'I am confident in using Excel ... I also have a basic certificate in food hygiene' (R3)

'Basic CAD drawing, accounts and costings, communication and time management' (R4)

'I am able to plan and successfully chair a meeting' (R6)

'My organisational skills took a battering ... but I believe I have improved considerably' (R7)

'Social skills, communication, workload priorities ...' (R8)

'Skills that I have now developed further are my customer relationship skills, people skills, IT skills and general confidence' (R9)

Attitudes

'I gained a good insight into what a managerial role entails and requires' (R1)

'It highlighted I enjoyed the real world of HR work and enabled me to establish a direction for my career' (R2)

'I definitely believe that I am even more career determined than before and I want to do well for myself' (R3)

'Going on placement has allowed me to realise what I want to do in life' (R5)

'I have learnt how important it is to be part of a close team and to communicate with these team members' (R6)

'I feel more professional' (R8)

Emotions

'I enjoyed the routine and the stability of the working environment rather than the lack of this in the student world' (R2)

'I started off being quite shy 6 months into my placement I was comfortable as I realised this is the only way I could complete a task' (R3)

'I would always be worried if I was going to say the wrong thing ..' (R4)

'During my time on placement the HR officer bullied me [BUT] I was able to overcome these difficulties and would feel comfortable overcoming them again' (R5)

'The trust and support from my colleagues enabled me to build on my confidence. I began to voice my opinions ... I am able to voice my opinions in a more constructive manner' (R6)

'Negative situations do arise in the workplace but how we react to those situations determines our success' (R7)

For those that responded, and these are likely to be skewed towards the more positive experience, the placement can to some extent be described as life-changing. Students view seemed to confirm that the placement experience was one that simply could not be replicated within the university setting. They identify the richness of organisational, contextual and interpersonal experiences, even when tinged with some negative or less positive elements, were truly developmental and a real learning experience. This confirms experiences referred to elsewhere:

'Working [in the service industries] offers students the opportunity to gain abilities which the lecture theatre simply can't' (Richards, 2000, p6).

This being the students' perspective, it is clear that there is a substantial element of WBL which adds to the students' learning, most specifically within the business setting as considered within a business studies degree programme. This answers the first question set out earlier: WBL does have some element of uniqueness and adds to the existing academic learning.

Secondly, respondents do seem have understood and appreciated a learning experience even when the placement experience has not always been an entirely positive one. Hill (2004) has commented similarly.

The range and quality of student responses does indicate a problem of encouraging appropriate reflection and articulation of the WBL. Some respondents provided very reflective commentaries whilst others struggled to achieve the same level of analysis. This is not necessarily a consequence of WBL, but merely a mirror of general student performance and the capacity to engage in reflective thought.

Research findings – HUBS academic staff view

The value of the placement to student development

There is no doubt within the academic community that the placement year is a valuable, some argue essential element of the undergraduate business programmes. The school has increased the number of courses that offer a placement year, however there is concern that the number of student opting for a placement has declined over the past few years. Quite often viewed as an 'option' rather than a necessary requirement, it was agreed that ways of encouraging more students to take placements should be developed.

The positive effect on the student was the most notable immediate effect seen by academics, as they saw returning students to have matured, become more focussed and clear in what they wanted to achieve, which can help with the option selection for the final year modules as the year in industry has enabled them to have a taste of things that they may or may not wish to do.

Final marks and improvement in marks were also noted by all interviewees. Although they did not have the actual evidence, they felt sure that there was a marked improvement in some cases a "whole grade difference between those who had been on placement and those who hadn't". What was agreed is that answers in assignments and exams were more mature with the ability to apply the knowledge better and challenge the theory helped by being "more fired up" which helps them to "get a lot more from their final year of study"

Making the placement 'count' in the final degree mark

Again consensus of opinion was shown in terms of the placement year 'counting' towards the final degree mark and the view was commonly held that this should be a way of encouraging students to apply for placements. There were however varying opinions as to the credit value and weighting of the placement year and a number of ways of making the placement 'count' were suggested.

Academic staff showed their concerns in 120 credits being a "big part for those students who haven't really embraced it (PDP) in years one and two", reflecting the notion that a 'good' placement experience and success in the workplace may not necessarily be reflected in the PDP type portfolio. Suggestions for alternatives included relieving the burden in the final year, either by making the dissertation proposal a requirement during the sandwich year or marks from the placement year carrying marks towards the placement or by having fewer modules to have to study.

The effect on placement take-up and placement experience

The commonly held view was that by placements counting in the mark calculation, this would encourage more students to apply for placements. One academic did feel that less students would do it as "it's another element of uncertainty that you are putting in place because they just don't know do they?" There were also positive effects in terms of the students' motivation on placement as the student may become more proactive in searching for activities that will enable them to develop particular skills. It would also provide a clear structure and introduce standards as well as providing guidelines for the visiting tutors and the supervisor in the workplace.

Assessing the placement

Assessment of the learning in the workplace did not highlight any major concerns by academics as one pointed out that "it's more and more possible to compare the workplace experience to uni experience as the uni experience becomes more practical and less theoretical in some parts". There was recognition of the different methods of assessment and that exams and assignments are not necessarily in tune with work-based learning.

Considerations

A theme running through the interview responses was the idea of parity in the placement so that there was 'fairness' to all students: those who had been on placement, those who hadn't and those whose placement was limited in the opportunities it provided. Consistency in judgement would need to be maintained ensuring that it was clear to the visiting tutors and the placement supervisors just how the placement should be judged.

The impact on resources was highlighted as it was felt that time allocation should be considered for the visits, support in addition to site visits and the marking of the student work.

Although positive effects on students had been mentioned previously, there were slight concerns that assessing the placements in this way may put additional pressure on the student and it may “inhibit (the student) experience a little bit if they are always thinking of it as another academic exercise ... instead of them developing in the workplace sort of naturally”.

The proposed pilot placement model

This does however lead into the next key questions – assessing the quality, quantity and standard of WBL and WBL evidence.

Based upon an existing model for sandwich placements within the University, it is proposed that there will be four main methods of assessment for the pilot:

A formalised diary of activities outline skills and competence development over the duration of the placement which within the current placement model is purely to assist in producing the placement report. A reflective style will need to be developed and for the majority of students reflection on learning from the workplace will be a new concept as any current reflection, through PDP modules is primarily through group and individual work at university.

A placement report providing an analysis of the organisation, the role of the student within that organisation and an evaluation of the learning and development as a result of the sandwich year.

Placement supervisor appraisals will be undertaken twice through the placement, the final appraisal being the main mechanism for the grading of the placement in terms of social, personal and work related skills development. This final appraisal also reflects the students’ view of this being one of the most appropriate ways of assessing their development, progress and performance throughout their workplace.

Visiting tutor reports will continue to be a basis for assessment as these provide the link to the academic output requirements of the placement.

Managing the pilot scheme

Visiting tutors

For the pilot scheme, the number of visiting tutors will be kept to a minimum to enable consistency and ease of evaluation of the scheme. Tutors ordinarily are selected on the basis of their area of expertise and academic interest, however this may not necessarily be the case for the pilot scheme.

Students on the pilot

It is recognised that the pilot group will not actually benefit from the scheme as they will not be awarded academic credit, despite our request for them to undertake additional work. A Certificate of Work-Based Learning Competence will be issued for the successful completion of the pilot scheme which can be used as an aid when applying for graduate jobs.

The competencies

The QAA framework of competencies for business students will be used whereby it is anticipated that all students should have an opportunity to show the development of a number of personal/social skills which are relevant to any workplace and not organisation/environment specific.

In addition, there will be a list of marketing related competencies that students can select and collate evidence of having gained these skills, backed up by reflective statements and review at 3 monthly intervals throughout the placement. It is not expected that all students will develop all of these skills due to the differing nature of the placements and the opportunities that are available or presented to the students.

Ensuring student support for the development of learning targets and the reflective process

It is recognised in any new job that there is a period of settling into the role and finding your feet before there is any real outputs or level of confidence from both the student and the company. It will be crucial to have a visit from the tutor early on in order to assist the student in developing targets for their learning upon which they are then able to reflect.

Other factors to consider are assisting students in identifying opportunities for development, what learning they would like to acquire and how they can develop this learning.

Monitoring and evaluation of the pilot placement scheme

Whilst the success of this model can be demonstrated within the School of Computing and Engineering, it is recognised that there are differences between the content and nature of these programmes that may also result in differences in the experiences of students.

What needs to be fully explored is the success of the pilot scheme in order to determine the way forward with placement accreditation from 2008. It is also vital from the point of view of students who will embark upon the placement search from September 2007 that they are clear of the potential routes forward in terms of accreditation.

Conclusion

What is evident from the research is that placements provide a valuable experience, the workplace providing a rich source of learning and experience which enables students not only to develop skills and competencies for that work and future employability, but also enhancing students both in terms of personal development and the ability to apply that learning when completing the final year of study.

The work undertaken to date supports the notion of awarding academic credit for the placement year, however further research will inform the debate on the appropriate level and value at which the credit should be awarded.

What is potentially suggested is that awarding credit, however this may be eventually undertaken, could be an influencing factor when considering whether to undertake a placement year. The pilot scheme will enable us to monitor the development and learning within the workplace and to understand the affect on students in their pursuit and application for placements and in looking at how learning from and within the workplace can be enhanced through encouraging reflection and application of that learning.

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