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Evaluating the impact of sandwich placements on employability.

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Abstract

The graduate employment market is competitive; graduate jobs are available, but with an increasing student population nearly 1 in 5 recent graduates remain unemployed. Sandwich placements provide students with an integrated, structured period of work experience that produces recognised benefits in terms of academic achievement and employability. This paper evaluates the impact of sandwich placements on employability amongst undergraduate management students from 2009 onwards; analysing destinations data for levels of employment before qualitatively evaluating student experiences in gaining graduate employment. Differences in employment patterns between placement and non placement students are identified; placement students exhibit more focused career strategies, confidence in applying for graduate schemes and an ability to articulate their skills and experience in relation to the requirements of an employer. Completing a sandwich placement continues to be a beneficial experience for undergraduate students, contributing towards their employability and a successful first step on the career ladder.

Key words: employability, sandwich placements, transferable skills.

Introduction

Despite an increase of 2.8% in the number of graduate vacancies available in 2012, the overall level of graduate opportunities remains 6% below the pre-recession levels of 2007 and with 50 000 additional students completing their studies in 2012 the graduate employment market remains extremely competitive (High Fliers Research, 2012). Unemployment rates for recent graduates remains high at 18.9%; a slight improvement on 20% the previous year though graduates frequently take longer than two years to find appropriate employment (Office for National Statistics, 2012). The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2011) longitudinal study of destinations showed that 3.8% of UK domiciled students from 2007 remained unemployed three years after graduation. A degree in itself does not guarantee a job; increasingly employers are looking for graduates who can make an immediate contribution to their organisation with previous work experience being a key factor for success (Attwood, 2010).

Dearing (1997) recommended work experience as an important element of undergraduate provision for academic development and employment. Sandwich placements are an opportunity to gain relevant work experience while studying and are acknowledged as being beneficial in terms of academic performance and employability (Reddy and Moores, 2006). Despite these benefits, placement uptake has declined from 9.5% in 2002/3 to 7.2% in 2009/10 (Education for Engineering, 2011) with students not taking a placement having to demonstrate their employability through alternative mechanisms. This paper evaluates the impact of sandwich placements by comparing employment rates between placement and non placement students and exploring placement students' experiences in gaining employment in comparison to non placement students as they take their first steps on the career ladder. Based on academic literature, consideration will be given to the meaning of employability, how employability skills can be developed while on placement and a student's ability to articulate these in relation to graduate employment.

Definitions of employability

From the literature there is no single definition of employability; Hillage and Pollard (1998:2) identify it as 'being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work,' while Yorke (2006:8) refers to 'a set of achievements – skills, understanding and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment.' The government approach to employability has been skills focused, through Dearing (1997) and Leitch (2006), with a belief that skills lead to employment and subsequent economic prosperity. The Confederation of British Industry (2009: 14) definition refers to employability as 'a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess.' Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) prefer the term capability, identifying four required to enter the labour market: values, social engagement, intellect and performance from which a graduate can develop their personal identity to articulate to employers. Harvey et al (2002) differentiate between early career skills to secure employment and long term career skills to support learning and employability on a continuing basis. Students' interpretation of employability is narrower though; recognising the connection between skills and gaining initial employment upon graduation, rather than a long term, sustainable career (Tyman, 2011). As employability is a broad concept, skills and attributes require contextualisation for a specific industry; thus further adding to the complexity of developing employability among undergraduate level students.

Significant work has been undertaken by universities to embed employability into the curriculum, but despite initiatives, employers continue to complain about the lack of employability skills amongst graduates (CBI, 2011); Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough (2009) posit that skills need to be set into a real world context rather than the classroom if students are to transfer their learning to the workplace. Employability skills comprise a variety of abilities that can be transferred from one job role to another; Bridges' (1993) definition requires skills to be adaptable for application in different situations and contexts. The CBI (2009) refers to these as soft generic skills including self management, communication and problem solving. Murakami et al (2009) believe social competence to be a key skill developed on placement, supporting learning in the workplace and subsequently in a career. Much has been written in academic literature on what constitutes the ideal set of employability skills but identifying a singular list is impossible due to the complex nature of skills and the specific requirements of industry. Undergraduates therefore continue to face a range of opportunities to personally develop their employability skills either through the curriculum or through extra-curricular activities; the challenge on an individual basis being able to understand and access the ones that are the most appropriate for their personal circumstances.

The role of sandwich placements in employability

Sandwich placements are periods of time spent outside the university environment gaining first-hand experience of working in a particular industry. Thick sandwich placements last a full academic year but shorter periods between two and six months, known as a thin sandwich placement, also provide employment benefits (HESA, no date). Regardless of the length of time spent on placement, Knight and Yorke (2004) believe they provide a positive contribution towards employability allowing students to develop knowledge and transferable skills; personal attributes that can be taken from one job role to another. Mason et al (2009) argue that certain skills can only be developed in the workplace; though the experience achieved on placement should be integrated into the degree to maximise the learning (Bourne and Ellerker, 1998). Placements are an ideal mechanism for personal development (Neill and Mulholland, 2003), setting skills into a practical context and appreciating the commercial significance of employee actions.

Possessing employability skills adds value to a graduate (Tomlinson, 2008); employers now demand graduates who are able to make an immediate contribution to their organisation, requiring flexibility in today's dynamic business environment (Wickramasinghe and Perera, 2010). Placement students are more likely to be in graduate employment six months after completing their course than non placement students (Mason et al, 2009); with the first job upon graduation having a long term impact on career success it is essential to start in a strong position thus reducing the risk of underemployment (Mosca and Wright, 2011). Increasingly graduate recruiters are employing students who have undertaken a period of work experience with themselves; it is predicted in 2012 that 36% of graduate vacancies will be filled by applicants with previous work experience at the organisation (High Fliers Research, 2012). The ability to demonstrate contribution based on actual work place achievements is highly valued by employers and work experience allows an organisation time to fully assess an individual's capabilities.

Completing a placement provides multiple benefits; besides enhanced employability, placement students have higher levels of academic achievement (Gomez et al, 2004; Mansfield, 2011). There is evidence though that it is the more academically able students who choose to undertake a placement in the first instance (Surridge, 2009); possibly recognising the complementary employment benefits of work experience and improved final degree classifications. Other advantages include maturity having spent a year away from university (Rawlings et al, 2005) and increased levels of motivation to achieve academically (Gracia and Jenkins, 2003); in the classroom these attitudes frequently distinguish placement and non placement students. Purdie et al (2011) reported on the psychological benefits of work experience with students possessing higher self esteem and self efficacy to face the demands of gaining employment.

To secure a placement, students usually have to successfully progress through a number of recruitment stages such as application, interview and assessment centre before being offered a place; similar to the graduate recruitment process, it provides preparation and skills that can be later used to secure permanent employment. Selection for placements is a demanding, competitive process; rejections may be received but students securing placements have to be persistent, continuing to invest time in high quality applications rather than withdrawing from the placement process to continue with their studies (Aggett and Busby, 2011). Being able to articulate skills and abilities in relation to a specific job role is often a barrier in

undergraduate recruitment (Raybould and Sheedy, 2005). Placement students have a distinct advantage over non placement students; completing structured work experience that has been supported through their academic studies allows them to more readily provide evidence and practical examples of their ability to fulfil the requirements of the job. With increasingly complex and sophisticated graduate recruitment processes (Branine, 2008), placement students are able to engage more confidently due to their previous success in securing a placement and the learning achieved through the work experience.

With a wealth of evidence on the positive benefits of sandwich placements the expectation would be of an increasing popularity rather than declining. Reasons for declining participation are relatively under researched in the academic literature but recent findings indicate a growth in student numbers, the changing composition of the student body in terms of personal background and a variable availability in the number and location of placements due to the economic situation as factors potentially contributing to the decline in placement participation (Walker and Bowerman, 2010). Universities therefore need to ensure high quality information and support allowing students to make an informed choice on whether to undertake a placement or not. The enhanced academic and employment benefits for placement students are undisputed and the likelihood of gaining appropriate level employment after graduation is increased. From a university perspective consideration must continue to be given to the increasing number of students not participating in placements; providing mechanisms through their academic studies and extra-curricular activities to provide demonstrable evidence of their employability.

Methodology

A mixed methodology was used to collect and analyse the data. Firstly employment rates between placement and non placement students were compared using official university data from the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey; required by HESA it measures employment six months after graduation. With a target population of all graduates, data from 2009 and 2010 was analysed; 2011 data is currently unavailable due to time lags in collection but when published will be analysed in the context of this research. Dividing each year group into placement and non placement, the lowest response rate was 37% for non placement students in 2009 and the best 100% for placement students in the same year.

The second focus of this paper, a qualitative analysis of student experiences in gaining employment, was achieved through an online questionnaire. Through open ended questions rich data was gathered to interpret student's experiences, feelings and understanding of the graduate recruitment process and where undertaken the role of their placement learning in relation to employment. In total 24 former students from 2009 onwards were contacted, half had undertaken a placement and half had completed in three years. Responses were received from 10 graduates with 7 having taken a placement and 3 not. The responses were split over time as follows: 1 from the 2009 cohort, 6 from 2010 and 4 from 2011. The mix of years allowed employment experiences to be considered over a longer period of time and whether the benefits of the placement had a longer term impact on employment than the initial government measure of six months through the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey.

Finally, a modified version of the questionnaire was issued to current final year students graduating in 2012, to compare current experiences of engagement with the competitive employment process; 20 responses were received in total, equally split between placement and non-placement students. By gathering data from current and former placement and non placement students all possible combinations of study were surveyed with suitable sample sizes as the questionnaire gathered rich, contextual data.

Findings

Analysis of employment data six months after graduation

The Destination of Leavers in Higher Education Survey is completed annually measuring students employment status six months after graduation. Collected by universities on behalf of HESA, the data provides an initial view on employment achievements. Due to the lengthy collection process data is available for students graduating in 2009 and 2010.

Table 1 Destination of Leavers in Higher Education Survey (%)

Year of Graduation	Employment	Further Study	Unemployed	Other	No response
2010 Placement	65	14	-	-	21
2010 Non placement	54	13	10	13	10
2009 Placement	66	17	-	17	-
2009 Non placement	27	-	10	-	63

(University of Huddersfield Data gathered for the Higher Education Statistics Agency)

The data indicates higher levels of employment amongst placement students in comparison to non placement students; more significantly no placement students were officially classed as unemployed after graduation. The high no response rate to the survey for 2009 non placement students means data for that year is largely incomplete, failure to respond could possibly indicate a lack of employment thus reducing the desire to return the survey. In the other category students cited voluntary work and not available for work due to maternity leave as their current status. It is felt by many, particularly in the current economic climate, that measuring employment six months after graduation is too soon. Students may take employment to start earning a salary but take longer to start their first steps on a structured career path, requiring more time to locate and be recruited to suitable positions.

The name of the employing organisation is identified in the survey with placement students being more likely to gain places on training schemes with the large graduate recruiters; positions at these companies are highly competitive and sought after. They usually command higher starting salaries; offer structured training and opportunities for progression, factors perceived by many as a positive start to a successful career. In contrast non placement students tended to work for smaller, less well known organisations, often local to their home. A few non placement students had success on graduate recruitment schemes but these students had more substantial work experience either returning to university after being employed for a number of years or having a substantial part time job.

An advantage of placements, already identified in the literature, is a third of placement students' return to their placement organisation for permanent employment after graduation. Recruiting former placement students allows organisations to assess their abilities over a longer period of time; it also lowers the risk of graduate employees leaving due to the work not meeting their expectations. 25% of placement students in the above data returned to their placement organisation in a permanent position after graduating with some gaining places on the graduate recruitment schemes open nationally for applications. Even though the official data is not available for 2011 graduates, from personal contact with students this situation has continued with 30% returning to their placement organisations. Important personal contacts and networking opportunities achieved through placement can help in finding permanent work; opportunities that are not always available to non placement students.

From the evidence the pattern of graduate employment among placement students reinforces the academic literature. Students are in appropriate employment six months after graduating with no one being unemployed and at least 25% return to their placement provider. They are employed by larger, well known organisations that would appear to offer long term opportunities. Additionally, academic performance was stronger amongst placement students with a third achieving a 2.1 or a 1st in 2009 and 50% in 2010; a much stronger performance than non placement students with 17% and 35% respectively. In 2011, supported by other developments in the curriculum, this rose to 60% for non placement students and 91% for placement.

Employment Experiences

All students who had undertaken a placement were positive about the experience, feeling it was beneficial in terms of their learning, both during placement and in their final academic year, and particularly in helping gain employment upon graduation. Most students taking a placement had planned to do so before they started university, several stating they had chosen the course specifically as it offered an integrated work placement. Three respondents had decided to take a placement after the workshops at the start of their second academic year once they realised the benefits of placements for personal development and employability.

Within the school there is a dedicated placement unit with a remit to support students in finding a placement, working with organisations to ensure the level of placement is

appropriate and to supervise students as required during the placement experience. Placements are advertised through the unit and students attend placement workshops to help prepare CV's and applications. Placement students cited the unit staff and services as being excellent and supportive. However, even though the placement unit support the process the student has to secure a placement on their own merit, attending interviews and assessment centres as required. Students were surprised at the demands made upon them to secure a placement and not all students wanting a placement were successful in obtaining one. One non placement student commented that he "did not dedicate enough time early enough" to the process and two others became down hearted and lost motivation after receiving a number of rejections. Persistence is important, one student had attended seven interviews at different organisations before securing her placement; even though she struggled she was keen to take a placement, exhibiting determination until she was eventually successful.

The process of securing a placement is not dissimilar to graduate recruitment practices; though due to the number of applications there are likely to be more stages used to filter the candidates, one student went through six stages before being offered a graduate job. Placement students felt better prepared and less daunted by the challenges of finding employment. They had experience of interviews and assessment centres to draw upon and felt that even though the graduate job market was competitive, they could cope with the challenge. Placement students were more strategic in their approach, targeting their applications more carefully; a technique advocated by the Careers and Employability Service. Due to having work experience placement students had a clearer understanding of the industry they wished to enter, allowing them to tailor their CV's and applications. Job searching is a time consuming activity, placement students were more likely to concentrate their efforts on a smaller number of organisations rather than taking a scatter gun approach; this strategy also reduces the number of rejections which can undermine confidence when searching for work.

Placement students were also more confident in their personal abilities and the development of an enhanced skill set; being able to provide practical examples of their achievements and relate these to the requirements of the organisation. Demonstrable work experience is a key factor for employment success; the experience gained on placement is potentially more valuable than part time work as companies offering placements are committed to developing the student, probably providing experiences not available solely through part time work.

Through their placement students felt they had developed a professional work ethic, an understanding of working in a corporate environment, an ability to work with a range of people in terms of skills and level within the organisation and to work under pressure where deadlines had to be continually met. Articulating skills is a common difficulty when applying for jobs but placement students were able to draw upon their work experience during all stages of the recruitment process, providing relevant examples of the contribution they could make to an employer.

Graduate respondents who had not taken a placement did not feel disadvantaged long term though they did take longer to secure employment and were more likely to be working for smaller organisations. A small number had applied unsuccessfully for graduate training schemes but most either lacked the confidence to engage with the process or had left it too late in the recruitment cycle for employment in the year of graduation. Non placement students had been more successful with companies filling individual positions and even though there was not a formal graduate scheme, the jobs were of graduate level and did provide opportunities for development and progression. Unfortunately no responses were received from non placement students who had not secured appropriate employment; contrasting their experiences would have provided a different dimension not explored here.

The most striking difference between placement and non placement students from the research was in the behaviours and attitudes exhibited by current final year students. Placement students were more focused in their job search strategies appreciating time scales and engaging with the graduate recruitment process earlier in the academic year than non placement students. A smaller proportion of non placement students were applying for graduate jobs but these were across a wider range of organisations, not necessarily exhibiting a coherent strategy towards an industry. Placement students had a clear understanding of the industry they wished to work in and even though they were making multiple applications, they were fewer in number and more targeted than those who had not taken a placement. Placement students were more selective in the organisations they wanted to work for in terms of job content and opportunities offered. They also expressed longer term career goals particularly in relation to the opportunities offered upon completion of a graduate recruitment scheme. A key difference is the level of confidence amongst students with those taking a placement believing, that despite the demanding, competitive recruitment process, they would secure a graduate job. At the time of writing a few placement students had already

obtained employment for September and a number of others were in the latter stages of assessment centres and final interviews. In comparison only one non placement student was at the assessment centre stage.

Other differences observed included improvements in final year performance and a pattern of study that resembled a structured work pattern. Placement students were more likely to study in a fixed time routine and for longer periods of time, commenting that they had become used to working full time and found it better to maintain the structured pattern for study. Placement students appeared more driven to succeed, expressing higher levels of motivation and commitment; one student said he now realised the level of work required at university to later be successful in the workplace. Another benefit expressed was the ability to see classroom theory working in practice and then bring that knowledge back to the final year of study. There was also an appreciation of the competitive nature of the employment market; placement students not only wanted to maximise their grades but were also prepared to put in considerable time and effort to achieve this. To tutors, placement students appear to be working hard and maximising their opportunities during their final year of study. Non placement students should not be excluded from this point though; on an individual basis they were also working hard with the ability to achieve good grades and secure employment upon graduation. However, when comparing patterns of behaviour as a group there were significant differences in attitudes among non placement students, with a number not appreciating the level of work and commitment required for the highest grades; such differences are not observed in placement students who appear to be more unified in their attitude and approaches to employment.

Conclusions

The continuing evidence from the academic literature and the findings of this research indicate that a sandwich placement is a positive experience offering students multiple benefits. Placement students are more likely to achieve higher final classifications, exhibit increased levels of motivation and secure graduate employment earlier. There is evidence though that it is the more able students who decide to take the sandwich course route; already being in a stronger position before taking advantage of an opportunity to further enhance their skills and abilities and so drawing ahead of the field. Non placement students can still perform well but this is more dependent on the individual and their personal background.

Non placement students who had graduated and successfully found work did not feel disadvantaged but current final years were much less optimistic regarding their employment prospects upon graduation.

Placement students are more strategic and structured in their engagement with the graduate recruitment process. A place on a graduate scheme with a blue-chip organisation is a highly prized opportunity; starting your career on such a scheme has a long term impact on employment prospects. Placement students have already been successful in securing employment, engendering confidence and providing experience of recruitment processes that can be later used in obtaining a permanent position.

Even though placements are clearly beneficial, as the number of students undertaking them continues to decline, alternative mechanisms for developing employability skills must be considered by students individually and by universities on an institutional basis. Increasingly employability is being embedded into the curriculum but students also need to recognise alternative opportunities for development through extracurricular activities and be able to articulate their skills and abilities to potential employers. In a competitive market, employers are in a strong position to choose the best candidates; demonstrable work experience and an ability to identify an individual's potential contribution to an organisation through their skills and abilities are key factors for success. Placement students are in a stronger position to demonstrate their employability and have a competitive edge over non placement students in securing graduate level employment.

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