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Developing professional placements in the Business curriculum

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Author biography

Chris Procter (<http://www.business.salford.ac.uk/staff/chrisprocter>) is a senior lecturer with responsibility for co-ordinating placements for students at Salford Business School: <http://www.business.salford.ac.uk/programmes/placements/>. He has worked with employers and students in managing many hundreds of placements over a 20 year period. Chris' background is in IT Project Management and his teaching is in Project Management. He is a full member of the Association for Project Management (APM) and the UK Higher Education Academy Special Interest Group in Project Management. Chris has extensive experience in educational research and particularly Technology Enhanced Learning and he is the co-chair of the International Education in a Changing Environment conference (www.ece.salford.ac.uk).

Abstract

Purpose

This paper explains the practice of professional placements in a large UK Business School, grounded in literature and research concerning the relationship between professional experience and employability. It explores possible further developments of this practice into student entrepreneurship.

Design

The paper outlines the relevant literature and then describes the operation of the scheme in practice. It identifies relevant problems and discusses opportunities for both development and research.

Findings

Professional experience is of immense value to both students and the organisations that host them. Despite reluctance on the part of some of these two key stakeholders, it has the potential for further expansion in terms of number of students on placement, their location, their experience and integrating placements with entrepreneurship education.

Practical implications

Organisations may see the benefit of employing students on one year or shorter contracts, Universities not currently offering professional placements *within the curriculum* to their students may wish to adopt best practice, and those that are already involved may wish to consider the optional/compulsory element of the placement experience in order to address the reticence of many students to secure this experience. The paper suggests solutions to the well established question 'Can entrepreneurship be taught?' by investigating the idea of Enterprise Placements.

Originality/value

This work helps to explain, in a practical way, the opportunities and problems associated with the implementation of a placement scheme in the context of relevant literature.

Keywords

Placement, professional experience, internship, work based learning

Introduction

The University of Salford was one of the first Universities in the United Kingdom (UK) to pioneer the idea of a 'sandwich degree' whereby an undergraduate worked for a year in an organisation between the second and final years of their degree. A one year period of employment is an excellent opportunity for the student to develop knowledge and skills in their discipline and for the employer to assess the suitability of a student for a long term future graduate position. Students benefit substantially in developing their professional skills, defining their career objectives, and learning about the different organisations and opportunities available to them.

The paper commences with reference to relevant literature. It then describes how professional placements have been integrated into the curriculum in a large UK Business School. This has taken place across the entire portfolio of programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. This integration has involved the internal and external accreditation of placements, including the participation of employers in assessment. This accreditation has made it possible for the assessment of work based learning to contribute to a student's final award.

The paper describes the support provided to students, the interaction with employers, and highlights the problems that have been experienced. It concludes by looking at further work that needs to be done to address these issues, potential for research in the field and ideas for further development, and in particular the extension of placements to include enterprise and entrepreneurship.

Please note that some readers will be more familiar with the similar word 'Internship'. Within the context of this paper a Placement is defined to mean a period of employment undertaken by a student that contributes to their programme of study. The type of placement described in this paper is generally of one year duration, although of course many institutions offer shorter placements.

Literature

Placements in the curriculum bring together two related traditions of practice and research: the first is the tradition of vocational learning, and the second is more theoretical work advocating experiential learning.

Employers have recognised the value of new temporary employees with fresh knowledge, skills and enthusiasm, typically at relatively modest salaries, who are potential future long term employees (Harris 2004). Universities and students have recognised many benefits of vocational learning and placements, with research showing students with placement experience substantially enhancing their employability (Neill and Mulholland 2003). This is particularly the case during difficult economic times (Lightfoot 2009). A number of studies have shown the benefits of placements to students (Mandilaras 2004, Rawlings et al 2005). This has also been recognised in numerous policy documents, most notably in the UK in the Dearing Review (Dearing 1997) and the Leitch Report (Leitch 2006) which both stressed the value of vocational education.

In Higher Education, work placements offer students the unique opportunity to combine professional experience with their University qualifications. Indeed, many disciplines require student placement experience – for example in most areas of health studies and teacher training placements are a requirement for completing a programme of study. The integration of placement learning is today a common feature of undergraduate business programmes (Evans 2004) and many other disciplines. National organisations (e.g. NCWE, PLACENET and many others in the UK) and international organisations (e.g. WACE) have developed to share experience in placements, and dedicated conferences (e.g. ASET) and journals (e.g. Journal of Vocational Education and Training) have been established to advance knowledge in this field.

More recently, the terms work based learning and work related learning have become well established. work based learning can be understood simply as learning that takes place in the workplace; a placement undertaken by a student as part of their programme of study is one type of work based learning. The term work related learning seeks to distinguish student experience that may not be directly located in the workplace. For the purposes of this paper the terms professional experience, work based learning and work related learning can all be considered a part of the more generic term 'experiential learning'.

The value of experiential learning is widely supported in the literature. Generations of scholars of pedagogy have understood the wisdom of the saying attributed to Confucius:

"Tell me and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand."

It could be said that this is one of the foundations of constructivism, which is often associated with the theory of active learning (Bonwell and Eison 1991) and experiential learning popularised in the 1980s by Kolb (1984). Kolb drew on the work of scholars such as Dewey, who had stressed the importance of interaction and experience in learning, and Piaget whose research was concerned with the significance of interaction to psychological development. Kolb developed the the Experiential Learning Model (ELM) as being fundamental to learning. The ELM is composed of the following four elements:

- concrete experience,
- observation of and reflection on that experience,
- formation of abstract concepts based upon the reflection,
- testing the new concepts

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_A._Kolb)

Essentially these are all components of well organised student placements. Interestingly, this is supported by research conducted by Blackwell et al (Blackwell 2001) investigated the relationship between work experience and employability. They concluded that student reflection on their own learning was a key factor in this relationship. It is also a factor that distinguishes an effective professional placement scheme from basic work experience.

The literature on both vocational learning and experiential learning, which provides us with some theoretical context, is agreed on the close relationship between employability and well managed work placements. The following sections explain how this has been put into practice in one UK Business School.

Salford experience

The University of Salford was first established in 1896 as a Technical College providing vocational training to the working class. Building on these roots, the University, since being established in 1967, has always emphasised the significance of its relationship to industry and commerce. Thus it was natural that Salford was one of the first Universities to offer 'sandwich' degrees on numerous undergraduate programmes. When Salford Business School was established in 2006 as the result of the merger of 4 former departments, one year placements were already offered as an option to students on BSc programmes in Business and Management, Finance and Accounting and Information Technology/ Systems (IT/IS). Best practice was developed from the scheme offered to IT/IS students so that a 'Professional Placement Year' module was established common to all students. Students undertaking Leisure and Tourism programmes were subsequently also offered this option. The principles of the module are as follows:

- Students gain experience in the process of securing a placement as well as during their employment
- A Professional Placement should be experience that contributes to a student's learning in their particular degree. This is not the same as work experience, and the University must approve all placements to ensure this fit.
- Students on placement require supervision from both their employer and their University

- This experience should be assessed by both the University and the employer, and contribute towards the student's final degree mark
- This experience generally contributes significantly to the student's results and life chances

Placement module

The Professional Placement module contributes about 11% of the value of the final degree award for those who have undertaken it. The great majority of students who complete a placement (over 90%) achieve one of the two highest classifications of a UK degree i.e. a First class or Upper Second class honours degree. This is in comparison to approximately 50% of the general student population. The assessment includes:

- evaluation by both the employer and University supervisors which they discuss and agree together,
- a presentation to an audience of students, employer and University supervisors,
- a report that describes, reflects upon, and evaluates the experience and
- a weekly logbook

Students may be placed with large multinational organisations which have a well established route for managing student placements (e.g. Intel take approximately 80 undergraduates on placement in the UK each year) or with small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) who tend to give the student a greater variety of experience, albeit in a less structured environment. Students are also placed in the National Health Service, local government, and in educational institutions including schools, colleges and universities.

Problems on placement

A number of problems do occur. These can include when the employer is no longer able to employ the student; for example in 2009 one employer ceased trading owing to the recession and the University helped the student secure a position in a second company for six months. Another problem is when it becomes clear that the employer is not providing appropriate experience for the student as described during the application process: this is generally something the placement supervisor can resolve but is in part determined by the ability of the student in question. The third problem is when the student is not able to conduct the work expected of them or when there is a personality clash. In general the University supervisor is able to help resolve these problems but it must be stressed that such problems are unusual. In general all stakeholders are very satisfied with the outcome of placements; many students return to the organisation for permanent work after graduation, and many employers return to request another student for the following year so that University staff develop an ongoing relationship with specific employers.

External accreditation

In 2008 the Business School secured external accreditation for the placement scheme through the City and Guilds institution. The award of the Licentiate of City and Guilds Institution (LCGI) qualification to students who pass the Professional Placement module is externally verified and enhances the student CVs. External accreditation necessitates an annual visit by an external examiner to ensure the quality of the placement experience and assessment, and the external examiner can pass on their suggestions for continuous improvement.

Postgraduate placements

In 2009 the Salford Business School placement co-ordinator developed the University's first scheme to offer a one year placement option to postgraduate (MSc) students. This commenced as a trial for four postgraduate programmes in 2009-10, and has been extended to all Salford Business School postgraduate programmes from 2010-2011. Students undertaking MSc's have the option, after passing the taught component of their programme, to either complete a dissertation (the default option) or undertake a one year placement.

Securing a placement is conditional upon being offered such an opportunity by an employer. To ensure the academic rigour of the qualification, the main assessment of the placement year is a *work related dissertation*, where the student compares the experience of working in their particular discipline to the theory that they studied during the taught part of the MSc. Thus, for example, a student studying for an MSc in Project Management, who undertakes a junior project management role for their placement, would discuss how the practice of project management in their experience compares to the theory as covered during their course. The student may investigate a more specific aspect of this experience, for example the application of quality standards in the practice of project management.

At the time of writing it is too early to evaluate the efficacy of this scheme but it is clearly popular with students who recognise the value of experience alongside qualifications.

Support provided

The University provides support for those interested in placements at both a School (Department) level and at a central (University) level. Weekly workshops are provided to students to explain the benefits of placements, how to improve their CVs and applications, good interview technique, and details concerning tests used by employers such as psychometric tests. Support on these human resource techniques is also provided on a one to one basis in response to student demand. Thus for example, students have the opportunity to book a mock interview. Employers are invited to visit the University to speak to students both about opportunities in their organisations, and to give advice on the qualities in an applicant that they seek. An annual placement fair is held (see <http://www.careers.salford.ac.uk/business>) where students can meet employers and professional bodies. In addition, during 2009-10, for the first time, ten students, who had returned to the University after completing their placement year, were employed part time to mentor those students looking to secure a placement opportunity. This project was funded by the Centre for Excellence in Professional Placement Learning (CEPPL). The mentors developed new means of support for students, such as daily drop in opportunities and online support through a Facebook group.

Once on placement, the School ensures that every student has an academic supervisor. They visit the student once during the first two months of their placement and once during the last two months. They are also available online or by telephone to provide support should this be needed by the student, and give feedback on draft copies of the student's work. The academic supervisor will also liaise with the employer to ensure that all parties are satisfied with the placement. The supervisor also marks the student's report/ work related dissertation at the conclusion of the placement, which is then moderated by the placement co-ordinator.

Scope for improvement

There are three areas of concern for any placement co-ordinator:

The first is to ensure the quality (and legality) of the placements available and quality of the placement experience. In some cases this means rejecting potential placements as not being suitable to the student's programme of study. In other cases it can involve discussion concerning re-adjustment of the specification of student's duties to more accurately reflect employer requirements or student capabilities.

The second is to ensure a constant stream of suitable placement opportunities to offer to students. This entails continual renewal as organisations close and others open. Ensuring sufficient high quality placement opportunities, which provide a proper salary and meet all required health and safety guidelines, is a challenge during a recession. Some employers are reluctant to invest the necessary time to train students and develop their skills. Offering sufficient placements can only be achieved by a major team effort on the part of staff throughout the Business School and wider University, utilising their contacts for the benefit of students.

The third area of concern is to ensure that there are enough students making good quality applications for every position that is offered. In Salford Business School (at the time of writing) the one year placement is an option. Many students are enthusiastic about this option when joining their programme of study, but this enthusiasm can wane when they are fully involved in their coursework and exams. Securing a good placement can be a long, time consuming and arduous process, and it can be difficult for a student to maintain their enthusiasm after numerous rejections. This reluctance is well established in the literature (Morgan 2006). Thus in practice only a minority take the placement option. In a survey conducted in 2009, of 208 final year students who did not go on a placement year, more than 50% (112 respondents) said they did not undertake a placement because they didn't have the time and/or commitment to make the necessary applications. Some (23 respondents) did not apply because they did not have enough confidence in their own ability, especially if it meant leaving home. Many students (36) also did not appreciate the value of relevant experience to their future job prospects, believing that a degree alone would be sufficient. Finally, many (18) did not see the difference between the casual part time work that is very common amongst British undergraduates, and the professional experience of many one year placement students.

Future development

Student lack of engagement in University initiatives on employability and enterprise is potentially a fruitful area for future valuable research. Perhaps surprisingly, the issue of student motivation to secure placements is a significant concern for Business Schools. Many students do not take part in any University activity that is not a requirement of their degree, whatever the level of support or opportunities provided. In an effort to increase the proportion of students undertaking placements, from 2011 Salford Business School undergraduate applicants will have to choose whether they want to register on the undergraduate programme with a placement or without. The entry requirement will be higher for the programme involving a placement year and students who register on this programme will be required to apply for and secure a placement year. The University will ensure that the student has all the necessary support to achieve this. Those who are unsuccessful will be able to transfer to the shorter programme without a placement. Not surprisingly, evidence from other UK Business Schools suggests (Procter 2010) that where a placement is compulsory a much greater proportion of students go on placement and are therefore more employable upon graduation.

Enterprise Placements

Entrepreneurship education has assumed greater significance during the recession which developed in Western countries in 2009, being seen by political leaders as an impetus to growth. The placement scheme described above offers serious opportunities for Entrepreneurship education which are currently being investigated. This investigation is very relevant to the important question posed by a number of authors (e.g. Henry et al 2005, Klein & Bullock 2006) 'Can Entrepreneurship be taught?' Both papers cited above offer evidence from their review of the literature that entrepreneurship can indeed be taught and indeed this was the motivation for the launch of International Journal of Entrepreneurship Education (IJEE). However, I would argue that experiential learning is vital to developing the skills of entrepreneurship.

At Salford Business School we are now adapting the best practice from the well established one year placement programme to create one year *Enterprise Placement* whereby students effectively employ themselves during their placement. This develops idea of Entrepreneurship education incorporating experiential learning and keeps the University at the fulcrum of innovation.

Research amongst students as to whether they would like to see the aforementioned placement scheme broadened to include one year Enterprise Placements. Four focus groups were held with different student classes on a voluntary basis. The student feedback was very positive and such a proposal is therefore being developed. Within the one year placement scheme, students would have the opportunity not only to be employed in a position relevant to

their programme of study, but would alternatively have the opportunity to establish their own business i.e. an Enterprise Placement. The University would approve this on the basis of an assessment of the student business plan and (if approved) provide expert advice in key areas of finance, marketing, information management and physical resources during the year. Thus a group of advisors would liaise with the student enterprise placement from inception to implementation to review. The student would be assessed on their description, reflection and evaluation of the business they established/ tried to establish and relationship to relevant literature. The grade achieved would not depend upon the success or otherwise of the business. This proposal is creating significant interest amongst all stakeholders and establishes a link between professional placements and entrepreneurship, introducing experiential learning in a valuable way.

Conclusion

This paper has briefly reviewed the literature in vocational and experiential learning which underpins professional placements. It then describes the Professional Placement scheme offered within a major Business School in a UK University. It describes the benefit of such a scheme to students and employers and therefore also to the University itself. It describes the way in which such placements are integrated into the curriculum, the support provided and the problems involved in managing such a scheme. The satisfaction of offering professional placements comes from the academic, professional and social maturity of students returning from placement and the opportunities that open up to them in consequence, alongside the valuable collaboration with employers. The paper has concluded with future developments in a continually evolving and improving project. Most importantly it discusses the possibility of developing professional placements to include Enterprise Placements whereby the student establishes their own business with the support and guidance of the University and as part of their programme of study. This offers the hope that the student may learn Entrepreneurship by doing, and thus address the question 'Can Entrepreneurship be taught?'

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