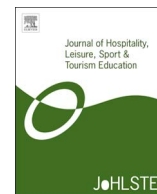




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‘Employers’ perspectives on maximising undergraduate student learning from the outdoor education centre work placement

Mark Lawton

Department of Science, Natural Resources & Outdoor Studies, Lake District Campus, University of Cumbria, Ambleside LA22 9BB, UK

A B S T R A C T

Recognising the growth in provision of vocational undergraduate programmes and the requirement for high quality work placement opportunities, managers from four residential outdoor education centres were interviewed to determine their perceptions on the components necessary to maximise student learning. The findings showed that the managers greatly valued the potential of a work placement; a need for clarity over the expectations for all stakeholders and that the placement remained authentic to modern centre life. Specifically it was felt that the students on placement needed to experience all aspects of work and not just the ‘glamorous’ bits.

1. Introduction

A combination of a highly competitive employment market and the increased economic costs associated with higher education has reinforced the importance of providing students with a programme of study that will meet their needs. For many individuals, the decision to continue their educational journey is not one that is taken lightly and as such it is becoming increasingly important for the higher education institution (H.E.I) to be seen to be providing ‘value for money’ (Universities, 2015). Emphasising the continued expansion of higher education, due to an increased recognition of learning to enhance quality of life, the seminal Dearing (1997) confidently predicted students to be.

“...increasingly discriminating investors in higher education, looking for quality, convenience, and relevance to their needs at a cost they consider affordable and justified by the probable return on their investment of time and money...” (p.11).

Accordingly, the need for higher education to recognise and be responsive to the changing needs of their students and other stakeholders (such as employers) can be seen to be a priority. Furthermore the launch of the National Student Survey in 2005, allowing students to provide an assessment of quality (National Student Survey, 2015), has further reinforced the need for H.E.Is to provide programmes of study which meet the student need and better prepare graduates for the workplace.

Frequently touted as one of the most important things undergraduates can do alongside their programme of study, work-based learning is becoming commonplace and integrated across a range of subject areas and universities (Brown & Ahmed, 2009; Driffeld, Foster, & Higson, 2011; Little & Harvey, 2006). Such provision requires a considered approach to planning, being attentive to the needs of the students as well as to those of the employers. In an attempt to address this, Foundation Degrees were introduced in February 2000 in order to help address a perceived shortfall in the labour market of employable graduates (Quality Assurance Agency, 2007). Similar to the Higher National Diploma (HND), but providing degree status, Foundation Degrees provide the undergraduate a balanced integration of academic knowledge and work-related experiences, which can be achieved in part through the completion of a work placement (Quality Assurance Agency, 2007).

E-mail address: Mark.lawton@cumbria.ac.uk.

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This increasing expectation that the programme of study will meet both a student's academic and employability learning needs is exemplified in the following statement from an FdA Outdoor Education student as part of their response to the National Student Survey: *"I found the work placement is very important and was the best and most important part as it has given me new contacts and experience"* (National Student Survey, 2015). As illustrated the work placement is often cited by students as the single most useful learning experience of their programme of study. During work placement, theory meets practice and students have the opportunity to apply what they have begun to investigate and explore in the lecture theatre to 'real' situations and with 'real' people. The value that a work placement offers students in the development of their own philosophy and career aspirations should also not be underestimated. A well-structured work placement can provide students a supportive environment in which to gain a deeper understanding of both their strengths and weaknesses and an opportunity to be realistic about their hopes and aspirations. Replicating these experiences in the classroom environment can be seen to be challenging in the least.

Although the potential of the work placement to afford the undergraduate with enhanced learning opportunities is strong across the literature (Hall, Higson, & Bullivant, 2009; Orrell, 2004) there can be seen to be a relative paucity of research undertaken which highlights the key components of placements deemed necessary to meet such goals. Any literature that is available principally takes the form of a guide (e.g. Murray, Wallace and Overton, 2003) and makes no discernible indication that employers were ever consulted in production. Consequently, the aim of this research is to address this potential deficiency by way of considering the perspective of the employers. Analysis of data collected will then identify components of the undergraduate work placement deemed notable to maximise student learning.

2. Background

Higher education has a long association with the importance and value to be gained from students learning from experience and this can be seen to take many forms. Within science, experimentation is used within the laboratory and the fieldtrip has long been a feature within humanities. Few would argue that an essential ingredient of professional programmes such as nurse and teacher training is the supervised practice within schools and hospitals (Ulvik and Smith, 2011). As a whole when viewed from an experiential perspective this form of learning could be defined as the *"...process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience"* (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). This knowledge created from experience can be seen to take many forms and Beaty (2008) notes that *"...many vocational courses plan for experiential learning to take place outside of the university as work-based learning"* (p.134).

Carver (1996) somewhat confidently suggests that *"...quite simply, experiential education is education (the leading of students through a process of learning) that makes conscious application of the students' experiences by integrating them into the curriculum"* (p.150). Perhaps this confidence is a little misplaced as Dewey, considered by many to be the father of experiential education suggested that *"...experience is a weasel word. Its slipperiness is evident in an inconsistency characteristic of many thinkers"* (1925, cited in Beard & Wilson, 2006, p. 16). It could be all too easy to claim that each individual has the same experience and extracts the same meaning and impact from the same phenomena. Thus, the 'designing' of experiences and in this thesis, the designing of the work placement experience becomes somewhat challenging. This is not a new problem.

Furthermore, with such a broad lexicon it can be perplexing to arrive at clarity over a definition of what work-based learning encompasses beyond the axiom that it is learning in the workplace as an alternative to the campus (Brennan, 2005). In all likelihood there is an element of misapplication of the range of expressions with an apparent free interchange of terminology such as Work-based learning, Work Experience, Work Placement, Work-related learning and Practicum evident throughout the range of available literature. Alongside an increased use of terms such as employability and transferrable skills it is clear that the landscape of work-based learning is more populated and a glossary of terms is due.

Brennan (2005) recognises a distinction between work-based learning and work-related learning whereby the former is characterised by aspects of the curriculum being completed through various work-based activities and the latter by the development of more generic employability skills. Congruently, Moon (2004) considers work experience and work-based learning *"... as the poles of a continuum of work-related learning"* (p.163). The proposition is that work experience involves activities of a more generic nature, not necessarily specific to the learners' discipline whereas work-based learning has a focus on the curriculum (Portwood and Costley are cited in Moon, 2004). Ball and Manwaring (2010) profess that work-based learning provides *"...an authentic context for learning [and] can enrich student learning..."* (p.3). They go on to stress that main learning environment for the student is the workplace and that the *"...immediacy of the work context to provide practice and to encourage reflection on real issues [leads] to meaningful applicable learning"* (p.3).

Wareham (No date) employs the term 'workplace learning' and offers a spectrum between, on the one side, workplace-focused, where learning needs are identified in the place; through to University-focused, where learning takes place solely within the university and the workplace is recognised through simulation and case study. It is evident that the use of the workplace can vary from one institution to another depending upon how integral any placement is, amongst others, in meeting learning outcomes, programme aims and assessment process. It is therefore important to avoid thinking that there is only one ideal form of work experience because different forms offer different benefits (Blackwell, Bowes, Harvey, Heskesteth, & Knight, 2001). A recent addition to work-based learning portfolio is the use of the RWE or Realistic Working Environment with many institutions running their own business in which the students work in order to provide a realistic taste of the work place. Sedgmore (2013) claims that there are insufficient high quality employer placements and instead suggests colleges should provide realistic working environments (RWEs) such as training restaurants, travel agencies and hairdressing salons. An example of such an endeavour within the field of outdoor education can be seen to be Frontier Education, *"...a project that enables students to work with real clients in a controlled environment where experimentation and the introduction of new ideas are welcomed"* (Wilson, 2006, p.131). Mackinnon (2013) concedes that

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