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Abstract

In an increasingly competitive workplace, many graduates are finding getting onto the career ladder a significant problem. Employers often require work experience as an integral part of what the employee must have in order to carry out their job effectively. A university work placement scheme is seen as a way of making graduates more employable after graduation by developing workplace skills sets, complementing academic learning and providing valuable exposure to the working environment. This paper examines the advantages of a work placement to the student, placement organisation, university and potential employer. The paper provides examples of the work completed during the placement and student reflections on the work experience.

Benefits of a work placement

A student work placement is a scheme by which a student will undertake a normal job with an organisation for a period of six months to a year which is paid. The work placement normally takes place in the penultimate year of a four year degree course, to implement and develop the skills learnt in the first two years of higher education. In the fourth year the student returns to university to finish their degree.

The stimulus for encouraging more students to work outside the university on projects or placements comes partly from the 1987 Enterprise in Higher Education initiative and partly from a desire by universities to establish stronger links with the local community (Hogg, 1998). The University of Leeds is now in its second year in offering second year geography students the opportunity to take a year out in the workplace.

A work placement offers students the opportunity to learn about the attitudes of the organisation for which they are working and to relate these attitudes to knowledge and skills learnt as part of his/ her degree. As well as developing generic skills, the scheme helps the student to decide which specialist route, if any, they wish to follow in their final year.

Work experience provides students with 'professional orientation' and professional socialisation (the knowledge of how an organisation works and its employees interact), which can only be gained in the working environment rather than being something that can be taught. Strategic managers, recruitment personnel and recent graduates regard course-linked work experience as an important, if not crucial, element in the undergraduate experience (Blackwell et al., 2001).

Placement schemes generally have a positive effect on graduate employment. In 2001, UK graduates from placement courses had higher post graduation employment rates (69.1%) than students on equivalent non-sandwich courses (55.3%). Students on thick sandwich placements (year long placements) normally outperform those on equivalent thin sandwich placements (summer break placements). However, the extent of this employment success is dependant on subject area: built environment, business and social science graduates tend to have higher employment rates than science and language sandwich graduates (Blackwell et al., 2001).

Universities and colleges recognise that graduates going into the workplace need to be flexible and able to cope and respond to the changing complexities of commercial life (Morgan and

Turner, 2000). According to the careers service at the University of Leeds, "employers often define their own personal success less in terms of the relevance and grade of their university degree than in terms of personal effectiveness and transferable generic skills such as team working, self management, problem solving and learning skills combined with a determined hard working and pragmatic attitude" (Hogg, 1998).

Yorkshire Forward is the Regional Development Agency (RDA) responsible for the sustainable economic development and regeneration of the Yorkshire and Humber region. It recognises the benefits that work placements provide for both the organisation and the individual, and therefore encourages and supports involvement with and participation in work placements.

By offering undergraduate placement schemes Yorkshire Forward is able to help reduce the 'brain drain' and retain graduates in the region. From a financial perspective, the system reduces overall running costs as students have the skills to offer staff assistance at a relatively low cost, whilst creating a diverse workforce in terms of age. The organisation also benefits from having high quality staff requiring no permanent employment commitment and the opportunity to establish links with the University of Leeds, one of the country's leading higher education institutions.

Crucially, the placement also refreshes employer attitudes to employing young people. In many cases having placement students in the organisation "raises the awareness of the type of skills undergraduates can bring to a business and hopefully increases employment opportunities for graduates in such businesses" (Greenbank, 2002).

Requirements and assessment of the placement

The University of Leeds geography placement lasts for at least 30 weeks (preferably a year) and has to be recognised as a 'worth-while' placement by staff at the School of Geography, local businesses and other organisations.

The 'Year in Industry' is assessed simply on a pass or fail basis. In order to pass, students must produce:

- A planning document in advance of the placement.
- A placement log, completed throughout the placement, focussing on transferable skill acquisition.
- A verbal report at a de-briefing to the supervisor.
- A written report on return to study.

Background to the placement organisation

The placement at Yorkshire Forward (August 2004 - July 2005) was with the Strategy team of the Strategy and Policy Directorate. The majority of time was spent with the Research, Evaluation and Information (REI) teams and Yorkshire Futures, the Regional Intelligence Network for Yorkshire and Humber (which provides intelligence about the region to help improve decision making and better prepare for the future).

Prior to the placement, the employer supervisors met with the university course tutor to discuss the work plan, academic linkages and assessment of the placement. This provided a clear direction, good lines of communication and reinforced the desire to integrate the placement into the wider degree course.

Gammie *et al* (2002) and Bournier and Ellerker (1998) highlight the need for academic support during a placement year, as support from other students (due to being located away from the university) would not necessarily be readily available for those on a placement to turn to in times of 'difficulty' and 'loneliness'.

Placement objectives and work programme

With the university placement outcomes in mind, it was important to set initial broad objectives for the year. These objectives were the framework for the scheme, allowing for other work to compliment each aim. Under the following headings, the aims were:

1. Data Analysis:

Analyse the CBI (Confederation of British Industry) Survey, Framework for Regional Employment and Skills Action (FRESA).

2. Progress in the Region (PIR) 2004 / 2005 (Regional Monitoring Document):

Assist with the data collection, analysis, formatting, proof reading, dissemination and launch.

3. Information Services:

Write articles for the Yorkshire Futures Website and Newsletter. Provide newspaper cuttings to inform employees on regional issues.

4. Cross Team Working:

Job shadow with other Yorkshire Forward teams.

5. Personal Development:

ECDL (European Computing Driving Licence - a European wide Microsoft Office proficiency course), SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Scientists - the computer software package used to analyse qualitative data from the CBI survey).

The five objectives outlined the main projects and type of analytical research work that would be undertaken during the year. The objectives also provided a means for monitoring progress. However, after six months of the placement many of these objectives had been part-fulfilled and needed to be updated. The main additions to the objectives were: to help the evaluation team leader undertake projects for the evaluation team, oversee the undergraduate selection process, and to act as an intermediate for incoming research requests from other parts of the organisation. This development showed progression up the steep learning curve of the skills required to carry out the objectives and the desire to progress onto more areas of activity. Specific examples of work completed are provided below:

- Updated and completed FRESA (Framework for Regional Employment and Skills Action) monitoring document. The FRESA is a joint initiative to provide a single action plan to match skilled people to good quality jobs.
- Participated in research focus groups with people in the most deprived areas of the region.
- Created bespoke chapter summaries of *Progress in the Region (PIR) 2004* for four Yorkshire Forward Directorates. Attended the PIR launch event and produced its opening PowerPoint presentation.

- Researched parts of *PIR 2005* and proof-read two chapters to feedback views about the document's layout and style.
- Created articles for two *Yorkshire Futures* bi-monthly newsletters. The newsletter is distributed to 900 partners and contains latest network activity and research findings in the region.
- Wrote articles, reorganised content and uploaded new publications on a weekly basis on the redeveloped Yorkshire Futures website.
- Provided immediate administrative support to the Strategy team as well as producing daily newspaper summaries on regional issues to 70 colleagues.
- Cross-team working with the Policy team included the following:

- o Authored the opening speech for Yorkshire Forward's Chief Executive at the Regional Economic Strategy (RES) review events.
- o Completed a brief for the Heads of Service, Chief Executive and Chairman on the 2005 Budget outcomes and the effect it would have on Yorkshire and Humber region.
- o Updated the regional MPs researchers / contacts database after the election, and sent out invitations to the MPs for an event in London.
- o Attended a Parliamentary

Briefing on Tourism at Portcullis House in London; this event gave the MPs the opportunity to learn about the work that Yorkshire Forward and the Yorkshire Tourist Board are doing to promote tourism in the region.

- Collected data for the RES evidence base (evidence to show where the investment priorities are needed for the region). Attended and supported the five RES review consultation events.
- Completed a range of courses including an introduction to SPSS, a macro and micro economics programme and courses on evaluation, presentation skills, research methods and time management.
- Gained a First Aid at Work qualification and the ECDL.
- Organised, chaired and provided the secretariat for the monthly REI team meetings and their April 2005 Learning Lunch (an information session about the team).
- Updated the list of all trading companies in the Yorkshire and Humber region.
- Created a questionnaire to monitor the quantity of traffic that the Trade Yorkshire website (www.tradeyorkshire.com) was receiving and evaluated the website's usefulness to trading companies.
- Participated in the recruitment process for the undergraduate placement 2005/2006 by meeting candidates, setting and assessing an interview test and aiding the panel with the final selection.

Conclusions and student perceptions of the placement year

The placement has been constantly challenging both in terms of work (being assigned demanding activities which required an in-depth understanding of the subject matter) and also in terms of interaction with people. These meetings developed confidence and communication skills with partners ranging from business

partners, internal staff, Heads of Service, the Chief Executive and Chairman.

Being challenged at work is a good way to learn quickly but it can lead to a more stressful work life. This can be productive as it teaches one how to organise oneself and therefore forces the development of good time management skills in order to get the project or document finished in the time set. Being in a working environment allows for the refinement of prioritisation skills and personal transferable skills.

As with other employees, Yorkshire Forward has been very supportive in the personal development of the undergraduates on placements. I have attended numerous training courses that have been relevant to my job and final year of university.

However placements do have their disadvantages:

- Work placements are competitive; many undergraduates apply and only a handful are chosen. The placements for 2005/06 at Yorkshire Forward were all over-applied for.
- A work placement usually means that the student has to move away to a new geographical area from their place of study. This brings with it the personal upheaval of moving house, becoming accustomed to the new area and making new friends.
- Undertaking a work placement lengthens the period of study to another year, increasing the cost of a degree.
- Students returning from a year in industry have lost friends as many would have graduated that summer.
- One disappointing aspect of the placement at Yorkshire Forward was the occasional lack of clarity in how to carry out a particular task. However, this was an opportunity to use problem-solving techniques, offer opinions on the tasks and improve initiative skills.
- It was also disappointing that Yorkshire Forward did not have a Graduate Recruitment programme for which the undergraduates could apply for while on their placement.

The best aspects of the undergraduate experience whilst at Yorkshire Forward have been:

- Gaining valuable work experience with guidance and support from academics and employers.
- Developing and learning new skills, especially transferable skills.
- Working with different teams and interacting with staff and partners at all levels.

Generic skills of meeting new people, self confidence, time management, verbal communication and working on one's own initiative have all improved.

In summary the placement has provided a period of gainful employment with guidance and support from academics and employers.

It could be argued that the undergraduate placement scheme is as important as the formal degree programme in today's highly competitive workplace. By allowing the student to develop specialist and generic skills sets, the industrial placement degree acts as a vehicle for providing theory and practice and benefits all parties involved.

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For more information about the School of Geography and placement scheme at the University of Leeds please visit www.geog.leeds.ac.uk

For more information on Yorkshire Forward please visit www.yorkshire-forward.com
and for details of Yorkshire Futures please visit www.yorkshirefutures.com