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1 Why Do a Work Placement?

This chapter will:

- ▶ look at the recent expansion of work placements
- ▶ analyse the value of work placements
- ▶ identify different types of placement

▶ Expansion of work placements

Over recent years work placements have become increasingly visible in the curricula of universities, colleges and schools. This development has promoted a parallel expansion in supportive literature and web-based resources available to students. It is now widely recognised not only that placements are beneficial, but that, as competition for jobs intensifies, work experience is becoming an essential component of an applicant's CV within the post-graduation employment market.

The National Council for Work Experience estimates that in any one year approximately 100,000 higher education students will undertake work experience of some sort. In addition, around 550,000 Key Stage 4 pupils spend at least two weeks on work placement each year. Of the funding for education business links via Local Learning and Skills Councils from the DfES, a contribution of around £10 million is allocated to provide support for work placements for those at school. Further evidence of the growing importance of work experience may be seen in the development of foundation degrees that focus on workplace learning tailored to suit employers' specific needs. These vocationally focused degrees provide students with the experience and skills necessary to contribute immediately within a workplace environment. Foundation degrees were launched in 2001, and by September 2004 the number of places available rose to 24,000.

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Liz Rhodes, Director of the National Council for Work Experience, notes that in recent years the debate about work experience has gathered momentum. She attributes this both to ongoing criticism from employers that students are leaving university with little understanding of the world of work, and also to the fact that as more and more students are encouraged to attend university, the argument being that they will have better career prospects on graduation, students themselves have the expectation of swiftly entering and contributing to the workforce. She is clear that work experience is part of the transition process from 'learning to earning' and that it is essential in today's competitive market:

Work experience now has a crucial role to play in giving young people an introduction to the world of work. They have to understand what it is that employers want, and that's something that you don't necessarily get taught or made aware of whether you are at school, further or higher education. So there's a need to make people aware of the relevance of it, because the fact of the matter is, increasingly, if you can't show on your CV some kind of work experience, you are not going to get past first base. Work experience is here to stay. There is no doubt about that.¹

Ivan Lewis MP, Minister for Young People, affirms that work placements make an important contribution in the overall strategy to introduce and develop relevant skills in workplace environments:

The Skills Strategy we published in July 2003 calls on employers to get to grips with the fundamental importance of skills to their business – so that their staff have the skills and knowledge to meet current business needs and put them in a stronger position to develop and deliver higher value-added products and services. Work experience and work placements are a vital part of this.²

Liz Rhodes believes that the debate is ongoing and that it will remain significant and relevant, not least because, in addition to the current practice of recording the destinations of students after graduation, in the future universities are likely to be assessed on the employability of their departing students in terms of the length of time it takes them to find work. This, she asserts, will further highlight the importance of work placements, and will, in turn, impact on the skills required by work experience tutors:

I'm trying to make out the case that in fact this whole business of preparing students for the world of work is actually becoming more and more important,

¹ Liz Rhodes, interview with author, 6 October 2003.

² email from Ivan Lewis's office to author, 21 October 2003.

and therefore the professional status of those individuals who are involved ought to be taken more seriously because one of the things people like that have to be able to do is to face both ways and to understand the language on both sides.³

In today's world, traditional learning practices are increasingly being supplemented by practical and vocational initiatives with the aim of supporting current initiatives such as those of increasing employability and widening participation. Work placements play an important role in this ongoing cultural shift and are therefore likely to achieve even greater prominence in the future.

► **The value of work placements**

In attempting to quantify the usefulness and importance of work placements it is clear that there are multiple layers to the benefits that may be derived from the experience. This chapter adopts the premise that the 'value' from the students' perspective derives from three overlapping reasons: it notes that some skills may be learnt or developed from the actual experience of the workplace; that the student's own personality may develop as a direct result of the experience; and that the work placement may be beneficial in informing and influencing career decisions.

What you can learn in the workplace

Ideally, a work placement will give you the opportunity to learn new skills and to reinforce those you already possess. Some skills are practical in nature and stem from familiarity with particular equipment, for example, mastering specific computer software packages, or the use of a telephone switchboard facility, fax, photocopier or specialised machinery. You may also get the chance to hone and develop skills you already have through constant practice, such as by researching new areas, writing reports, or spending time on your telephone technique. The placement may also act as a useful bridge between theory and practice in that it provides an arena in which you may observe and test out what you have learnt at university and thus apply your theoretical learning to a practical situation.

For many students, a work placement represents the first real opportunity to deal with issues that go hand in hand with holding down a job. At a very basic level, this may include being punctual and always arriving for work suitably presented. It may involve living on a budget, sorting out your travel arrangements and organising the rest of your life to fit in with your work. In the course of the day, you will be able to test out your time management,

³ Liz Rhodes, interview with author, 6 October 2003.

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self-management and organisational skills and you will see how well you are able to cope with all aspects of the job, particularly those you do not like. In summary, you will be able to analyse how well you cope with the general constraints imposed by working life. You will find out which aspects you find irksome and you will discover the aspects of the job to which you can adapt easily.

Perhaps the most useful element of placement experience is the insight it gives into workplace culture, and the opportunities it offers in terms of finding out how well individuals are able to integrate into different environments. (This will be covered more fully in Chapter 5.) Learning how to cope in the workplace is a very complex endeavour, and may determine the level of fulfilment and satisfaction that is achieved overall. Interpersonal skills are likely to be put to the test in interacting with colleagues, working as part of a team and in dealing with office politics. You will need to effect a balance between being willing to help and ensuring that you are not coerced into undertaking work with which you are not comfortable. This may be particularly relevant if you are working for more than one person, when subtle assertiveness techniques might well be required. Integrating into the workplace calls for an ability to appraise the situation and personalities involved and to present and conduct yourself in a way that is acceptable both to you and to others.

Work placements are in many ways a transition from learning to earning environments and a stepping-stone to permanent work. Not only do they bolster the CV with relevant experience, they also enable the student to test out and gain greater insight of a specific industry or profession, to watch others in a particular career role and to learn additional skills from those around them. To an extent, these experiences are common to all working environments, but what differentiates workplace experience from the type of work commonly done by students who primarily wish to earn extra money during the course of their time at university is that during a work placement it is assumed that the student will spend time observing and thinking about the experience. It is, therefore, acceptable for the student to ask questions and request and expect guidance when required. Moreover, most important of all, the work placement provides an environment within which it is safe to make mistakes. The entire endeavour has an experimental air, making it possible for the student to take calculated risks in order to achieve more. The main aim is not to master all aspects of one particular job, but to learn about workplace culture, career options and choices and how best to improve your own contribution and performance.

What you can learn about yourself

Although the practical and cultural skills that can be acquired in the workplace are very important, arguably an even more valuable aspect of work

placement experience is the opportunity it offers for reflective development and analysis. In the course of the work placement, students can reflect upon how well they coped with office culture and politics; what they enjoyed; what they found boring and problematic and where their particular skills lay. Not only does this make future choices easier, it also means that the student can hone the technique of critical reflection that is fundamental to developing the skill of organising one's own learning and personal development planning. Clearly this is a skill that underpins university study generally, and, as I shall indicate, it is essential to have grasped this in order to undertake the reflective written assignments that now accompany many courses. In an ideal situation, the work placement will provoke greater self-knowledge and self-understanding, which in turn will mean that students are then more aware of how to evaluate and improve their own personal performance, without necessarily being reliant on guidance from others.

Just as learning new skills can lead to a boost in confidence, so can finding out more about yourself and using that knowledge to make the best of the present and to plan for the future. If you are focused on and aware of your own personal development planning, you are essentially much more in control of your future. In contemporary society, the notion of 'lifelong learning' has superseded the view that education ends after school or university. By considering self-learning as an essential ongoing goal, you are equipping yourself well for your future working life, in whatever field you choose.

Career decisions and how a placement can lead to work

In an increasingly competitive marketplace, even well-qualified students may face difficulties in stepping onto the first rung of the career ladder if they do not have practical experience. Work placement schemes provide an invaluable mechanism by which this gap may be bridged. Graduates with experience can offer an employer both theoretical and proven practical experience. Just as they possess a written qualification relating to the knowledge and skills they have acquired at university, they are also able to provide references as to their attendance, competence and attitude within the workplace. These documents together mean that the potential employer is taking less of a risk in that (s)he may be reassured that the student already has a level of familiarity and experience with workplace procedures and culture. Many employers now expect graduates to have undertaken work experience in the course of their studies, and since many small businesses do not have the time or finance available to train new recruits, they actively seek potential workers who are immediately employable. Also, work experience is a way of demonstrating a student's commitment to a specific sector or job. If you undertake a work placement in your second year and then apply for similar work after you graduate, it is clear that you have been committed to your ambition for some while, that you have

taken positive action to learn more about the area and that, having done that, your aims remain unchanged. This is very important, as it proves you mean what you say and shows determination and focus. Students who apply for work after graduation having shown no demonstrable evidence of interest in the area prior to that time will be at a comparative disadvantage.

Work placements may also be very important in confirming or changing previously held career plans as the actual experience may be better, worse or simply different from what was imagined. They are also an important part of career planning in the sense that if someone is interested in working in a particular industry, but is not aware of the options and jobs available, a work placement can offer valuable insight. This means that for students who only have a vague idea about what they would like to do in the future, a work placement can help in narrowing down the choices and indicating the general direction to take. Indeed, whilst in the workplace you will be able to achieve a better idea of what you want and don't want, what you are good at and what does not interest you.

You may find that you enjoy one particular aspect of the work far more than others and that you would like to spend more time focusing on that or related tasks. You may discover an aptitude for figures, writing or administration that you were only partially aware of before the work placement, and you may increasingly realise what is likely to give you the greatest job satisfaction in the long term. Equally, whilst all jobs have their own particularly tedious aspects, there may be some that you definitely do not want to contemplate as a result of your taster experience. Moreover, you may discover more about your working habits, such as whether you prefer to work alone or as part of a team and whether you enjoy working on a varied portfolio of projects or focusing primarily on one.

If you are successful in your work placement, this in itself may mean that your future application forms shine out amongst others, and the experience you gained may help you to get a better job. Also, just as whilst on placement you are likely to be networking in order to make new contacts and seek potential employers, they are also likely to be keeping an eye open for good potential employees. Similarly, people you encounter from different organisations whilst on placement may be interested in what you have to offer. You may well find that your placement acts as a 'trial period' at the end of which you have a job!

Benefits for employers

There are many proven benefits of inviting work placement students into the workplace from the employer's point of view. Not only do the students supplement the existing workforce at reasonable or no extra cost, they may also possess skills that are of direct use within the organisation, such as the

ability to write reports, conduct research, give presentations or operate computer software packages. Many students may possess transferable skills, such as being able to work unsupervised and being able to solve problems, and they may be more amenable to being trained for a job in a specific way than other, more experienced workers who may be more set in their ways and used to approaching tasks from a certain perspective. Being young and relatively unused to the workplace environment may sometimes be a bonus as it means that the student may be able to view a situation with fresh eyes and offer a new solution to an old problem. Similarly, students are often able to demonstrate a level of enthusiasm that may have deserted other members of the workforce. Frequently, students are employed to deal with a particular task, possibly a backlog that would otherwise remain untouched, and as such they are able to make a valuable contribution to the organisation before moving on. The contemporary emphasis on employability and transferable skills, which has permeated many university courses, means that a great proportion of work placement students are immediately useful to employers and are able to make an instant contribution. As such their value is evident.

It may also suit employers to build closer links with local universities and colleges, especially if they are hoping to recruit graduates from those organisations in the future, and they may therefore have an incentive to become involved with a work placement programme, and take students on a regular basis. This enables employers to develop an awareness of curriculum developments, and it is even possible that long-term collaboration between work placement tutor and employer might bring to light exactly what is required in the workplace so that students can be advised accordingly and focus on the areas in question. Moreover, just as the placement offers the student the opportunity to 'test out' the workplace, it also offers the employer the opportunity to 'test out' the student. Many work placement students go on to full-time employment in the same organisation.

Work placements are highly competitive, but it is important to be aware that employers need you as much as you need them. They are not employing you in order to do you a favour – you have just as much to offer them as they have to offer you!

► Different types of work experience

There are many different types of work-based learning experiences, the major differences between them hingeing on the overall duration of the placement; whether it takes place part-time or in a 'block'; whether it is paid, supported by sponsorship finance, or unpaid; and the nature of any associated assessment. Work placements can be customised to suit the

employer and the student, but they generally fall into one of the categories discussed below.

Sandwich courses/industrial traineeships

Sandwich courses and industrial traineeships are part of a longstanding tradition in Higher Education in the United Kingdom. Typically they take place prior to the final year of the degree and are especially prevalent in areas such as engineering and business studies. Since they are compulsory components of the degree course, there is normally ample assistance available for the student in locating and securing a placement.

Internships

Although the word 'internship' originated in the USA, it is now used in the UK and continental Europe, particularly by multinational organisations operating worldwide, for example Proctor & Gamble, Microsoft and Ernst & Young. Internships are very like industrial placements, although they tend to be for shorter periods of time, and some are offered during the summer vacation period. They are highly competitive and the closing date for applications is generally several months in advance of the placement start date. They are normally salaried, although at a lower rate than other junior positions within the workforce. Many interns go on to work for their placement organisation.

Course-specific work placements

Increasingly, more and more university departments are introducing work placement options into the courses they offer, partly in order to embrace the current initiatives for widening participation and increasing employability. The length of time on placement varies from one university to another and whilst some are done as a 'block', others are undertaken part-time over several weeks. Many course-specific work placements involve students undertaking work in a particular profession or area of industry, and there is usually help available within the university in terms of locating and securing placements. It is usually the case that there will be an obvious correlation between the subject studied at the university and the sector in which the placement will occur.

Gap year

It is now very common for students to take a gap year either before going to university or after graduation, and a large proportion use the opportunity to earn money in order to finance their studies. Work experience gained in the gap year prior to university may be influential in securing part-time work that can be undertaken in tandem with university study, thus easing the

financial burden. It can also act as a useful bridge to the full-time employment market post graduation.

Vacation placements

Some organisations offer work placements in the vacations, especially if their requirements fluctuate seasonally. Vacation placements have the advantage of not interfering with university study.

Voluntary work

Voluntary work is another valid means of obtaining work experience and a great deal of choice is available as to the location and the type of work involved. Indeed, it is possible to undertake voluntary work in a huge range of areas including, for example, ecology, teaching, archaeology and local, national and international charity work. Moreover, organisations that rely on volunteers are likely to be geared towards deploying specific tasks to a variety of individuals and may be more responsive to cold calling.

International exchanges

Some students prefer to undertake work experience abroad and to take the opportunity to travel and to learn more about another country whilst on placement. There are a number of organisations that specifically arrange and support such placements (see Chapter 2).

Part-time work

Many students take on part-time work whilst they are studying, often in order to ease the financial burden. This may be seen as a form of work experience, as it provides an introduction to the workplace and ample opportunity for work-based learning.

► Summary

This chapter has focused on the increased presence of work placements within university course modules and school curricula and has suggested that work experience is an important bridge between theory and practice, and between learning and earning. Employers want staff who are able to make an immediate and viable contribution in the workplace, and work placements can provide the experience necessary to facilitate this. From the student's perspective, work placements assist with career choices, allow skills to be practised and developed, boost confidence and self-knowledge and represent an attractive addition on the CV. From an employer's perspective, a work placement introduces a fresh pair of eyes to the organisation,

and offers a low-cost source of labour. This chapter has also listed some of the different types of work experience currently available.

Perspectives and Feedback

Well-chosen and well-managed students can provide enthusiastic, cost effective work in areas where permanent employees tend to get stuck in a groove ... I was talking to xxx recently and they had used students to search the web to find potential licensing partners for some of their technologies and they were delighted with the results: the students were clever, determined and quick.

Simon, employer – new technology

Work placements are extremely valuable for students on vocational degrees. Not only do they allow students to contextualise the taught part of their course but they provide valuable case study material for projects and dissertations and students develop useful contacts for their future careers. In my experience, students mature quite considerably whilst on placement and on their return, have a much broader perspective and a more grown-up attitude to their studies! In particular, when they return to start work on their dissertations, I find that they are much better at managing their time and more confident with their fieldwork. Even those students who have experienced disastrous placements do benefit – their confidence is boosted by dealing with difficult situations and they learn from reflecting on what went wrong and how they could manage similar situations in the future.

Naomi, tutor

The placement was organised so that I gained a wide range of skills that could be useful in almost any future career. This was useful, as I had not yet decided on what I wanted to do in the future. I found that my people skills and readiness to adapt to different situations developed significantly.

Emily, student

Work placements provide valuable opportunities for graduates to gain experience of the industrial sectors and complement their academic studies. Well defined schemes allow students to both apply theory to practice and learn and develop new skills.

Colin, tutor

Financially a placement could potentially make the difference between leaving [university] with debt and graduating with money in the bank! For [students] that may be worrying about whether or not they can afford university – this could make the difference, but should by no means be seen as a poor man’s degree route.

Thomas, student

We get enthusiastic support on productions which are usually under a lot of pressure and it brings fresh talent and ideas to the industry.

Celia, employer – TV production

I was frequently surprised, and sometimes delighted, at the change which occurred when capable, but unengaged, students went on placement. The most dramatic case was a student who had performed averagely on the course with the exception of the Computer Graphics modules. She had fantastic reports on placement and when she left the course, went to work for xxx. Undoubtedly, what she learnt at college helped but there was a major breakthrough when she experienced the workplace.

Trevor, tutor

I gave work experience to an autistic student in our mailroom where internal mail was sorted and delivered by hand and external mail franked and collected by Post Office employees. The average age of the staff was between eighteen and twenty-five; the young man was fifteen. He was fascinated by the drinks vending machines which were on free vend and this was the breakthrough to his mixing with the other staff. He started each morning by collecting the drinks and as the days went on gradually assisted with the normal mailroom duties. By the end of his three weeks he was participating in seventy-five per cent of the work. He eventually found work in the mailroom of another company.

Delia, employer – insurance

The work placement was invaluable. Because I do not currently work in the sector vocational experience is as important as the academic study to build my credentials and put the course into a practical perspective.

Mark, student

A work placement gives an opportunity for students to see behind the scenes and the reality of day to day activity in a high profile arts

organisation. It gives an opportunity to understand organisational structure and culture and may challenge preconceived ideas of the workplace as dynamic and highly creative as a lot of our work is routine maintenance and administration. For the employer, a work placement gives the opportunity to complete medium to low priority project work with extra assistance. It also offers the chance to learn from working with inexperienced individuals, particularly to gain managerial experience.

Sally, employer – museum

I would recommend a placement in a special school [for children with severe learning difficulties] to anyone. The experience gained there is valuable and universally applicable because, even if the teaching profession does not interest you, you gain an insight into the lives of disabled children, which will increase your social awareness and make you appreciate your own health and lifestyle far more.

Valerie, student

I got the opportunity to work with very talented people whose work I truly admired. I contributed a little to the creation of an exciting project – a magazine. This has always been my dream job so to get this close has now fuelled my determination to succeed! The art department were preparing for a big issue so they were busier than usual there were lots of jobs to do. It was the variety that made it interesting; I got to research in the archive, organise images, and mount up layouts. I received great contact numbers for other magazines and photo studios. I got a lot of thanks and a great reference. This will possibly open doors into a career in journalism. Also, this sort of professional placement will undoubtedly be good for my CV.

Kelly, student

We cannot stress enough to the students the importance of this time spent in the workplace. It is their chance to gain valuable experience and a real insight into the industry. It is also an ideal opportunity for them to build contacts with professionals. The more effort and enthusiasm the students put into the placement, the more they will ultimately gain from the experience.

Kate, tutor

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