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Research Article

Experiences and expectations of Placement Students and Graduate Interns at Sheffield Hallam University

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Abstract

Evidence suggests that the completion of a work placement as part of an undergraduate degree is of positive benefit to both graduates and employers, particularly in an era that stresses the economic contribution of the United Kingdom in higher education through developing graduate employability (Wilton 2012). This benefit is twofold: (1) work placements positively contribute to the development of generic employability skills; and (2) placements provide a ‘head start’ for graduates at the outset of their careers. Currently, there are 54 placement students / graduate interns employed at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU). Although, it is acknowledged that these employees are employed like any other member of staff to perform a role, this category of employee is specifically engaged in developing their future employability, thus it is important to ascertain how these employees perceive their development. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the perceptions of placement students, graduate interns and their line managers in collaboration with the Human Resources (HR) department, and data was analysed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed the following main themes: expectations; feelings; how the placement student / graduate intern worked; skills; personal development and working relationships; reflection on experience; thoughts about the placement student / graduate intern and views about their placement student / graduate intern. This research highlights aspects of the placement student and graduate intern experiences at SHU.

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Introduction and Literature Review

This paper aims to highlight the experiences of participants in the placement student and graduate intern scheme at Sheffield Hallam University, investigating aspects of personal development, working relationships, future aspirations and support received throughout their programme. It also aims to give suggestions for improving the scheme by getting feedback from participants to the scheme, including students, graduates and their line managers.

Today's educational context in Higher Education leads university leaders to prioritise their employability agenda, in order to ensure their graduates have the necessary skills and knowledge to be employable after graduating. As a result, the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) established the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund, which had graduate employability as one of its priorities. This section looks into the strategies taken to improve this timely issue, and how this relates to the present study.

However, in the first instance, it is essential that we understand employability in the current climate. Employability is considered to be 'a set of achievements that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations' (Yorke 2006, 8). Skills acquired through higher education are not only important for graduates to get employment, but also fundamental in supporting the competitiveness of the economy (Walsh and Kotzee 2010). When prospective students enter university, they come equipped with a particular skillset. The role of a good university is to improve the students' skillset, so that it falls in line with employers' guidelines and expectations, which can be done by curricula, extra curricula or co-curricular interventions of which student placements is one (Lowden, 2011). There is plenty of evidence that students expect their degree to enhance their careers: 79% of students surveyed for the CBI/NUS Student guide (2011, 7) indicated that they went into Higher Education to improve their job opportunities. However, improving job opportunities does not necessarily mean acquiring knowledge, but also developing personal qualities from an efficient learning environment and applying these in extracurricular activities during their undergraduate studies.

There is evidence in favour of placements, internships and other work experience, that show how extremely valuable they are to students, both in improving academic performance and employability skills. There are many different types of integrated work experience opportunities that may be included in a programme of study: placements (typically 12 month work experience) and internships (typically ranging from two to six months and up to 12 months or in some cases 24 months work experience). By offering an integrated undergraduate placement with the degree programme, universities have a valuable asset in claiming to offer employability plans to their students. A study looking at HEFCE internship graduates claim a total of 46% of internship graduates secured long - term employment following their employment (HEFCE, 2011). In addition, evidence suggests that individuals who take part in a placement year not only increase their employability skills but that they achieve higher degree classifications than their peers (Green 2010; Mandilaras 2004; Mendez and Rona 2010). However, research done by Higson (2011) suggested that placements do not improve academic results, it is in fact students who perform better that choose to do a placement, and students who are less academic benefit more from placements than their counterparts.

Although there are other valuable ways for students to acquire employability skills, a student who undertakes a placement or internship is immersed in the experience of being in a real workplace, finding out what it is like working at graduate level. This can help them understand quickly what skills they need to improve on and how to apply their learning to the workplace (CBI 2009). This is especially important as lacking work experience can be an obstacle to young graduates when seeking employment (CIPD 2009).

The findings from another study reveal the following 'top ten' skills and qualities the Institute of Directors (IoD) members rated as being most important for recent graduates to possess: 'honesty and integrity; basic literacy skills; basic oral communication skills, reliability; being hardworking and having a good work ethic; numeracy skills; a positive, 'can do' attitude; punctuality; the ability to meet deadlines; and team working and co-operation skills' (IoD 2007). This falls in line with Sheffield Hallam University's Refreshed Corporate Plan for 2011-2013 that shows that:

The outcome of the Sheffield Hallam student experience is highly employable graduates equipped with the skills and knowledge to prepare them for a professional life, socially responsible and able to live and work effectively in the twenty first century (Jones 2011, 5)

The impact that the present study has on existing literature is that it adds knowledge to limited research on the experiences of graduate interns, placement students and line managers in a university setting in one single research project. Previous literature shows either one of these groups as a separate entity, but does not show any links between students or graduates as employees, and line managers as employees and managers of employees. Neill and Mulholland (2003) report how students perceive their placement experience in relation to the Faculty of Informatics at the University of Ulster. Warburton (1975) also looked at placement students on a social work course at University of Liverpool to find out their expectations from practical work supervision and if their demands were appropriate. Kardash (2000) interviewed 57 undergraduates involved in an undergraduate research experience to evaluate the extent to which 14 research skills were enhanced. Beecroft *et al.* (2001) investigated the one-year pilot study of an RN Internship in Pediatrics for new graduates by investigating their skills development. Donan and Carthy (2011) used a survey to investigate the employment status of environmental science graduates and graduates' experiences of internships. However, there have currently been no studies examining all three groups together to provide an overall view on the employment situation of students and graduates, and also line managers in an educational setting such as an university in order to draw conclusions and suggest improvements for the current scheme of placement students and graduate interns at Sheffield Hallam University.

Methodology

A critical realist approach was used (Bryman 2008). The research project adopted a qualitative approach to gather in-depth views from participants. Qualitative methods prove to be valuable when an in-depth view or insight is required from participants (Creswell 2007). The present study aimed to gather information on the experience gained from individuals participating in the schemes and SHU as an employer for such schemes. This formed the research question for the present study. Obtaining views of line managers managing these placement students and graduate interns also prove to be beneficial in comparing their experience and making suggestions for future

improvements for the scheme. The project was approved by the Research ethics committee at Sheffield Hallam University prior to data collection taking place.

The Human Resources (HR) Department at Sheffield Hallam University provided the researchers with a list of potential graduates and placement students employed in the year 2012-2013. Also, they provided contact information of line managers who managed these placement students and graduate interns. An initial introduction email was sent to all the line managers to explain the nature of research and obtain approval for interviewing them and their employees on the scheme. 23 line managers agreed to be interviewed and gave consent for their graduates (10) and placement students (17) to be interviewed.

After an initial agreement to be interviewed, an email was sent to the 50 participants with an information sheet and informed consent form explaining the rationale of the project, ensuring confidentiality, anonymity and privacy. Participants were asked for a convenient time and day to be interviewed in a private and safe place on campus. Random allocation of interviews was carried out to avoid any selection bias. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a peer-formed set of questions, with suggestions from the HR department.

Individual interviews were recorded using a high quality audio digital recorder by three researchers and stored on a university-owned PC temporarily. Then the recordings were transcribed. The transcripts from interviews were anonymised and stored on a password protected computer for confidentiality, and all audio recordings were destroyed upon completion of the project.

Three sets of questions were compiled by the three researchers for graduate interns, placement students and line managers separately. These questions were reviewed, modified and accepted by the project manager and HR Department. Placement students, graduate interns and their line managers were invited for interview to gain perspectives from all three stakeholders. A pilot interview was conducted for one placement student, one graduate intern and one line manager after which required changes were made to the set of questions.

The data obtained was analysed separately by three researchers using thematic analysis. Each researcher highlighted the appropriate codes and potential themes independently. Coding is an interpretive technique that both organises the data and provides a means to gather the interpretations of it into certain themes (Creswell, 2007). After the initial coding, the researchers peer reviewed the codes and themes. A large number of codes and themes were generated after the analysis. These were narrowed down by combining similar codes under a theme and similar themes as sub-themes under a main theme. Any disagreement with the definition of codes and themes were solved after discussions. The final themes were discussed and drawn out from these discussions.

Results

The interviews were conducted from April to May 2013. Conducting thematic analysis (as described above) on the transcripts revealed 7 main themes for placement students and graduate interns with 22 sub-themes, and 7 main themes for line managers with 24 sub-themes, which are outlined below. The themes emerged in all the interviews. The themes are summarised and discussed below along with quotes from different participants who took part in the present study. There were 8 male and 15 female line managers. There were 7 male and 10 female placement students. There were 5 male and 5 female graduate interns. Interviews ranged from 40 to 60 minutes in duration. A total of 50 interviews were conducted.

Table 1: Themes that emerged for Placement Students and Graduate Interns

Main Themes	Sub Themes
1. Expectations	1a. Anticipation 1b. Expectations met / exceeded 1c. Motivation
2. Feelings	2a. First impressions 2b. Past feelings 2c. Current feelings 2d. Sense of belonging
3. How the placement student / graduate intern worked	3a. Flexibility 3b. Responsibility 3c. Performance 3d. Usefulness of projects / tasks 3e. Student / placement / intern perspective
4. Skills	4a. Training (skills development) 4b. On-the-job skills development
5. Personal Development and Working Relationships	5a. Formal and informal support from line manager and peers 5b. Professionalism at work

6. Experience	6a. Prior experience 6b. Application of knowledge from degree(s) future aspirations 6c. Employability support
7. Reflexive - reflection on experience	7a. Positive and negatives of experience 7b. Done differently 7c. Take away from experience

Table 2: Themes that emerged for Line Managers

Main Themes	Sub Themes
1. Thoughts about the placement student / graduate intern	1a. First impressions 1b. Initial performance 1c. Current performance 1d. Motivations 1e. Student / placement / intern perspective
2. How the placement student / graduate intern worked	2a. Performance 2b. Flexibility 2c. Responsibility 2d. Usefulness of projects / tasks
3. Skills	3a. Training (skills development) 3b. On-the-job skills development 3c. contribution
4. Personal Development and Working Relationships	4a. Formal and informal support from line manager and peers 4b. Professionalism at work
5. Views about their placement student / graduate intern	5a. Improvements of placement students / graduate interns 5b. Improvement of the placement student / graduate intern scheme 6c. Retention 7d. Transition
6. Expectations	6a. Prior expectations 6b. Anticipation 6c. Motivation
7. Reflexive - reflection on experience	7a. Positive and negatives of experience 7b. Done differently 7c. Take away from experience

Discussion

This section will highlight the main themes as outlined in the results section above. Most of the participants had **expectations** from the role they were applying for. The theme itself showcased their rationale for applying for the role. There was an overall feeling that expectations were met and exceeded, both from placement students and interns, but also from managers. Expectations of the role such as practical experience, development, opportunity to learn and apply knowledge from their degree emerged in all the interviews:

My expectations have definitely been met and I'd say exceeded in just the fact that my line manager has been really respectful of where I want to go with my career and allowing me to do work shadowing in different departments and when I've asked questions about being involved in certain areas more, they've been really supportive. I felt really supported throughout my whole time really.

To become an employee of an institution where one had been studying needs to be gauged for the **feelings** of an individual. Participants were asked to describe their feelings on their first day; by the end of their first week; by then end of their first month; and, at the time of the interview. Although the majority felt nervous at the start, they gradually became more confident and blended well into their team. Also, being part of SHU provided them with a sense of pride and a strong identity, showing the strength of a community feeling workplace. This ties in with the rest of the themes, which bring together the overall view of how these schemes function across the University, but also shows gaps in knowledge and operational delivery of the scheme.

I feel very proud when somebody asks me what I do I say I work at Sheffield Hallam University, I can't help feeling proud, because again this was my home when I moved to England to study I didn't have many friends, I didn't have many places to go to and this was my centre of my world. Sheffield Hallam University did everything to support me and I think the fact that I have excellent academic results and all these awards is because Sheffield Hallam supported me that well and I do have a strong sense of belonging.

How the placement student / graduate intern worked theme consisted of the participants' understanding of Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) and what they considered to be the most important aspects of working at SHU. Majority considered their tasks useful, valuable and developmental. However, few suggested that they were following mundane orders and that their progress was not determined by the tasks given. This could have been in cases where tasks and projects were pre-determined and a set protocol would have been required to be followed, therefore leaving little room for improvement in administrative tasks other than perceived values and changing the atmosphere at work. Flexibility and responsibility were two sub-themes that emerged and were further explored, as this would be an important aspect of being an intern/ placement student, which is being advertised as an innovative and forward-thinking position. Majority of the participants had a right to implement and suggest ideas at work, and the amount of responsibility was quite high for many participants, providing them with a sense of pride in their own work, but also with a challenge. When

asked, participants rated their own performance between 7-8 on a 0-10 scale where 0 indicates no performance and 10 indicates maximum performance, whereas line managers rated an average of 8-9 for their employee. This could be explained by a possible low self-esteem or perceived value of their performance by placement/graduate interns, also indicating that managers find placement student/graduate intern more responsible and with better performance levels.

I understand, obviously a big part of it is teaching and learning and giving awards, accrediting degrees; a large part of research and helping contribute to the government policy and innovations and just general advancement of society within the different facilities. Other sides to it are employability and the career emphasis.

They have been quite varied, which has been good, so I've been able to use lots of different skills and things.

The **skills** theme discussed about interviewees taking active participation in SHU training and/or development days. All the participants found this learning to be developmental, valuable and useful in their current work and future prospects. They felt that the skills they had learnt on training and/or in the job role could be transferred to another job, giving credit to the level of training and development focus of placement and internship schemes:

I'd never experienced something like that and I don't think I'd experienced it as a student at SHU, so it was a really good opportunity to get involved and actually learn something while you're staff here and make the most out of it.

The **personal development and working relationships** theme consisted of formal and informal support from line managers and peers. Participants found such support to be encouraging and motivating, and line managers felt this was necessary for the functioning of the department and task/projects assigned. In addition, line managers found their employees to be professional at work, professional behaviour with conversations and dressing appropriately. This can be interpreted in relation to the low self-scoring of interns as opposed to their managers' scores, as interns feel they receive enough support, but they still don't see their work as good as it should be, and feel they have more room for improvement than their managers do, as one respondent found: 'Confidence is probably the biggest things I've improved on.'

The participants previous work **experience** was explored (paid, voluntary or worked based learning). They found experience helped them in their current role, but not many participants were applying what they had learnt from their degree. Also, many participants felt the need of support and guidance at work right from application till the end. This is in opposition to the earlier theme of interns considering they receive enough support at the workplace, but might feel unsupported from application stage, as one respondent recognised, 'Maybe have a mentor on my floor, someone I can go to if I need anything or ask for more work.'

The **reflexive / reflection on experience** theme consisted of the participant reflected on any positives and any negatives of their experiences and, ultimately, anything that they would have done differently and what they took away from the experience:

Definitely glad that I've done a placement. I think the entire thing has been positive. Quite hard to pick out individual things, because all of it has been, I'm glad I did a placement rather than going to the final year, because that was something I was contemplating, do I want to go straight into the final year or do I want the placement? But I am glad that I've done it now, just to get the skills and experience.

Additionally, line managers were asked about the placement students/graduate interns input in work and how they performed on their first day, by the end of their first week, by the end of their first month and at the time of the interview. As previously mentioned, line managers rated their employees very high on the scale of performance. Line managers made sure that the participants were welcomed and integrated well into their teams. Also, few line managers were keen to retain their employees for future work prospects. Suggestions from line managers were received for their support and update about what others do with their students and interns. This is also highlighted in the conclusion, bringing suggestions for improvement together for an overview, as one line manager recognised, 'Get everyone together, get all line managers together as well and have a bit of an icebreaker so that we're aware of other line managers, get to meet each other and talk about worries and ideas.'

Conclusions & Recommendations

Limitations, suggestions for future research and practical recommendations will now be discussed. One of the limitations that this research has relates to the differences between

the experiences of placement students and graduate interns, as these might be different according to the age and experience, as well the expectations of participants prior to starting the employment. Also, different faculties and departments in the university might offer different levels of support and type of work will differ greatly according to the work needed in departments.

Suggestions for future research include a differentiation amongst faculties and departments, to emphasise and point out any large differences in experience according to this variable. Another improvement that could be made if this study will be replicated relates to the matching of employee and line managers when analysing transcripts. One other suggestion can lead future research to look at age and gender differentiation amongst placement students and graduate interns in order to gauge any differences, and also differences of age between line managers and their employees. This was outside the scope of the present study, but would make for an interesting project in the future. In addition, a follow-up study could investigate the transition of placement students into their final year of study and then back into employment (at SHU), and the transition of graduate interns into permanent employment (at SHU).

To conclude, the experiences of participants is overall a positive one, but improvements can be made especially on the structure and processes of the schemes, as suggested by the majority of participants in this study as outlined and discussed above. For example, one of the suggestions made by line managers would be the need for more regular support and knowledge sharing sessions for placement students, graduate interns and line managers, as well as the need for mentoring for current placement students and graduate interns, and buddying former placement students and graduate interns with new intakes. Another suggestion was to organise an 'icebreaker' meeting for managers in order to learn from each other. Overall, the need for more support was highlighted in a greater form by managers and not interns/placement students, thus posing questions on the perceived need for support from the leadership positions as opposed to the intern positions.

The aim of the present study was to highlight aspects of placement student and graduate intern experiences at SHU and to enhance this experience by future improvements was met, and suggestions for improving the scheme will, hopefully, be

taken into consideration by the University for future-rounds of participants in the schemes. In addition, the findings of the present study contribute to the academic literature, have been beneficial to SHU, and contribute to the lacking research in this area, which will hopefully, encourage others to conduct further research in this important area.

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