

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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THE VALUE OF UNDERTAKING A PLACEMENT YEAR: THE STUDENTS' VIEW

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**Research Domain:** Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

**Abstract:** Over the last few decades there has been numerous papers which look at the value gained by undergraduate students when taking a placement year. These papers tend to either show the improvement of students' performance in their final year (e.g. Brooks & Youngson, 2016 or Reddy & Moores, 2012) or consider the range of skills students bring back from their placement from either an academic or employer perspective (Fowler & Tietze, 1996; Wilton 2012). This working paper aims to investigate the students' own perspectives on the value of undertaking a placement year. Using semi-structured interviews this research intends to develop the existing literature by adding more of the student voice to those of the academics and employers. The results of the student interviews will be presented at the conference in December.

### **Paper: Background**

With the introduction of the Teaching Excellent Framework (TEF) in UK higher education the focus on student employability has again been highlighted as a governmental priority for the sector. Whilst this is not a new phenomenon, it has increased the pressure on producing employable students with universities' teaching excellent rating (gold, silver or bronze), in part, being measured by how many of their students have found degree level employment within a set period of time since graduation (Department of Business Innovation and Skills, 2016). Against this, there is also evidence that employers are less satisfied with the quality of recent graduates as they lack the required soft skills of problem solving, communication and negotiation and team working (Wilton, 2012).

One way students can become more attractive to employers is by having a sustained period of work experience – a placement year (Brooks & Youngson, 2016). Unfortunately, the overall number of UK students taking a placement year is reducing from just over 8% in 2002/03 to 5% in 2012/13, this is consistently lower than figures from across Europe generally at 55% or Finland, Germany and the Netherlands specifically at over 80% (Jones et al., 2017). Reasons being put forward for this low take-

up include students not wanting to break their pattern of study, the changing composition of the student body with the increase of international students and the general economic climate (Bullock et al., 2009; Brooks & Youngson, 2016).

Previous literature on the value students' gain from taking a placement year predominately concentrates on the improvement of academic performance in the final year or the students' skills developments from either an academic or employer's perspective. There is less evidence from the students themselves, which, given students are more likely to take notice of the opinions of other students, could be an important resource for encouraging more students to do a placement year. Therefore, this research aims to develop the literature which considers the student voice in relation to the value of undertaking a placement year.

### **Literature review**

Since early 2000 there has been numerous studies investigating whether taking a placement year improves an undergraduate student's final year academic performance (Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Crawford & Wang, 2015; Jones et al, 2017; Reddy & Moores, 2012). These studies report that students who take a placement year perform better by between 2% and 7%, are twice as likely to improve their classification and for home students are twelve times more likely to achieve a first or 2:1 classification than those students who have not undertaken a placement year.

In addition to the improvement in their academic performance, academics report students returning from their placement year are more motivated, have higher attendance records and have more confidence to engage further in the classroom with both fellow students and staff. Generally students have improved time management and organisational skills and approach their final year more strategically (Jones et al, 2017; Patel et al, 2012). Interestingly, Crawford & Wang (2015) report that a number of studies show that undertaking a placement does not appear to improve a student's critical thinking and therefore the improved performance reported above is more likely down to the development of the soft skills.

Placements provide an immersive learning experience which can only be obtained from working within a company for a sustained period of time (Fowler & Tietze, 1996). From this type of learning experience academics and employers believe students develop a range of both generic skills and personal attributes leading them to be more mature, have stronger communication and interpersonal skills, be able to work more effectively in teams and finally have an extensive awareness of the workplace culture (Wilton, 2012). Furthermore, placements allow students to continually and consistently integrate their classroom learning with work place practice, enhancing their disciplinary knowledge and technical skills and thus improving their ability to relate theory to practice both during their final year and in their professional careers (Arnold & Garland, 1990; Jackson 2015).

From the studies which consider the student's perspective, Bullock et al., (2009) find that returning students report having more confidence, increased maturity, improved interpersonal skills and an increased perseverance and aptitude for learning. This is similar to Paisey and Paisey (2010) whose students claim their placement year successfully improved their ability to extract and analyse information from a variety of sources, their time management skills, their ability to meet deadlines and their communication skills. Finally, Jackson (2015) reports that students who had taken a placement year believe the experience opened up networks for them and aided them in finding graduate employment.

## **Methodology**

This study focuses on the student experience and the 'student's voice' about the perceived value gained from undertaking a placement year, therefore, the overarching aim is to capture the students' thoughts and feelings of their placement experience. To do this a qualitative approach is required which can discover the individual and subjective views of the participants in their own words (Creswell, 2007). As placement experiences are individual semi-structures interviews will be used as this will allow the participants to give their own ideas and thoughts whilst staying within a standard interview structure (Packer, 2011).

As the data collection is currently on-going is it expected there will be between six and ten interviews conducted using the purposeful sampling frame of criterion sampling (all interviewees must have complete a placement year and be in their final year of study on their business related degree programme) to ensure all participants have experienced the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2007). The interviews will be analysed using template analysis which is initially built using themes from the literature and then developed during the analysis. This allows for flexibility in developing existing from the literature and new themes from the student voice (King, 2004). The findings will be presented at the conference in December.

## **Conclusion**

With the increasing pressure on universities to produce employable graduates, this paper aims to investigate how final year undergraduate students perceive the value they gained from undertaking a placement year as part of their degree programme. It is hoped that these findings can be used to increase the number of students taking a placement year in the future.

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