

How do you encourage student engagement in placement in placement learning?

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### **Abstract**

This paper charts the third phase of research examining the effect that undertaking a work placement has on degree performance. The initial phases used quantitative approaches to explore the relationship between doing a work placement, academic achievement and employability (Driffield et al, 2011 and Green et al, 2012). These phases found that those who undertook a placement improved their academic performance, because those students tended to be the most “engaged” in the learning process. Those who were less engaged, however, improved their degree class the most if they did a placement.

This paper develops these findings via qualitative research involving interviews with students who had engaged in placements and those who had not. The findings explore reasons why students do not undertake a placement, and give suggestions on what needs to be done by advisors and policy makers to encourage students to do a placement, thus increasing their grades.

### **How do you encourage student engagement in placement in placement learning?**

The recent Wilson Review (2012) reaffirms previous work indicating that a placement year benefits students’ employability skills, as well as improving their degree classes. Wilson’s report draws on considerable literature which demonstrates the power of a placement year to improve performance (Green, 2011; Foster et al, 2011; Mansfield et al, 2011).

This paper takes as its starting point this evidence, and the fact the take up on placement years has declined over the past few years. In 1994/5 12% of students completed a placement year, whereas in 2009/10 this had declined to 8% (White Paper, 2011). Previous work by the authors and colleagues (Driffield et al, 2011 and Green et al, 2012) sought to probe the previous literature by using quantitative techniques which explored a wide range of variables and a large data set from across disciplines and institutions.

The overall conclusion reached was that “more engaged students,” as measured by first year performance, choose to go on placements, but regardless of the level of engagement, the completion of a work placement year improves the student’s performance in their degree. Furthermore, those students achieving a lower overall mark in their first year (i.e. “less engaged”) gain more from doing a placement than those higher achieving students. There are a number of definitions of “student engagement” (Kuh et al, 2007; Coates, 2007). Given the engagement literature it may be argued that completion of a work placement year (which is associated with both improvement in degree performance and employability (Moore and Reddy, 2011)), is acting as a surrogate for student engagement.

This paper takes the research published in Driffield et al, 2011 and currently under development in Green et al, 2012, and starts to explore and develop the suggestions for further work suggest in

these papers. Both this work and that in Green et al, 2012 has been possible due to an HE Academy teaching development grant awarded in 2011/12. The research for this paper seeks to find ways to implement the policy recommendations of the Wilson Review (2012, p.40) that "Ideally, every full-time undergraduate student should have the opportunity to experience a structured university-approved undergraduate internship during their period of study." We also seek to inform future course design to find mechanisms for incorporating placement opportunities into degrees.

The qualitative research for this paper consisted of surveys conducted across disciplines at two HEIs. Questionnaires were produced, based on the findings of Green et al, 2012. The idea was to find the main reasons why students engaged in undertaking a placement year and why they did not. The data is currently being analysed and will be written up in time for the SRHE conference. The major themes are as follows:

Students who had undertaken a placement year indicated strongly that the possibility of doing a placement had been a strong influence on their decision to go to that university. These students indicated further that careers advisors and family members had influenced their university choices. Those students who had been on a placement year had a clear understanding of the link between work experience and a good class of degree, and the benefits of these to their future employability. There was no evidence that they had held this opinion before going on placement, but it was a very strong view afterwards. Students reported that the placement year became a great motivator in their final year studies, and they were more driven to do well. They advocated the importance of good university support while finding a placement.

Students who had not been on a placement indicated that undertaking a placement year was not a major motivation in choosing university and they were more influenced by keeping their current part time work. This group of students indicated that careers advisors and teachers were the main source of information when choosing a university. The findings show that these students were much less flexible about finding a placement. They were more focussed on a particular field of work and they saw barriers to a placement search. These students did understand the importance of work experience, but did not see the link between that and their degree so strongly.

It is clear from these initial findings that there is much work to be done with students in their early years at university to give them clear information about the advantageous effects of a work placement. The research shows that students, particularly the less engaged, make assumptions about other forms of work experience. This is where curriculum design is clearly very important. Work experience needs to be integrated into the learning experience in a way which maximises its impact on academic performance, rather than just undertaken as an adjunct. Work also needs to be carried out pre-university to inform potential students and their advisors of the effects a placement year can bring. The research shows that this is not too early, as the requisite engagement has to start from the first year at university. It is clear from the findings that student role models should play a central part in this pre-university and first year advice. "Engaged" final years, returning from their placement are the most compelling advocates. This kind of activity needs to be built into university structures and support.

Furthermore, work needs to be done within institutions to show that key employability competencies and life skills can be learnt from a wide range of placements which can be applied to a chosen career. Students should be assisted to be more flexible in their placement aspirations and

searches. Once again good support and advice structures, integrated into the degree disciplines, are essential. Flexibility from HEIs in placement requirements is also clearly important. Building on the part time work opportunities which students are already doing seems a fruitful area of development.

These findings will now be used to produce two guides, one for students and the other for advisors and policy makers. The guides will be used to increase the number of students who undertake a placement year.

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