Lesley Raven, **Darren Raven**
University of the Arts London, UK

Key skills and experiences to support art and design HE learning and employability (0239)

Programme number: N12.1

Research Domain: Learning, Teaching and Assessment

Literature and background

A perspective of a primary role of HE is economic, aimed at helping students prepare for work (Kerins, 2011), which reinforces that education and employability are integral. Increases to fees, reduced applications to HE (UCAS 2012) and rising unemployment emphasise the employability agenda for HEI's. Mainstream art and design education is in flux due to reforms such as a priority for STEM subjects leading to threats to creative subjects knowledge development (Carrington, Thompson & Le Brun, 2013), which in turn leads to reductions in knowledge, choices and opportunities for students. These concerns have been ongoing and Morley (2001) made a call for core skills in HE to be defined, developed and made transferable by industry, government and education stakeholders to best resolve student barriers to employability.

In support of creative education and employability, this paper aims to review student work placement experiences within graphic and fashion design disciplines.

A review of UK literature for measuring quality placement experiences was conducted. 'Measuring quality' (Hope & Figiel, 2012) reviewed recommendations for internships: the London Centre for Arts and Cultural Exchange Internship Toolkit (LCACE, 2008), the Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development Internship Charter (CIPD, 2009) and the Gateway to the Professions Collaborative Forum Common Best Practice Code for High-Quality Internships (GPCF, 2011). Skillset's Internship Charter Codes of practice and principles for high-quality internships (Skillset, 2011) was also reviewed.
Five themes were identified for best practice that should occur throughout the placement: recruitment, induction, supervision/mentorship, treatment and reference & feedback.

Fifteen graphic and fashion course handbooks were reviewed due to references to work-based learning. Five themes were identified:

    Simulating professional practice
    Encouraging the adoption of professional behaviours and competencies
    Preparing learners for entry into professional contexts
    Bringing industry into the learning environment
    Career, progression & CPD

As part of on-course study, students have opportunity to undertake work placement experiences. Assessment requires the submission of a reflective report. Tutors are required to assess the reports against course units and learning outcomes. Given that students are independent of tutors whilst on placement, high competencies for articulation, reflection and assessment of the experience is paramount.

Theoretical approach and methodology

A relativist and constructivist thematic approach was selected to examine student reflective reports to construct meanings for tutors to better understand on-course and work placement experiences, which supported a grounded theory approach.

A randomised selection of reflective work placement reports were analysed. Recent graduates were also approached and asked about learning during work placements as prompts to identify correlation with literature review findings of benchmarks for quality placement experiences.

A focus group occurred with tutors who teach and assess work experience units, to gain insight into the learning gained from on-course work experience learning.

Results

A review of student reflective report assignments identified positive and negative findings, which correlated with a majority of the graduate questionnaire responses:

Students supported Morley's (2001) call for the development of core, transferable skills by identifying a range of hard and soft skills, knowledge and understanding that were gained or enhanced to support employability: insight into specific job roles, task performance and processes; understanding the mechanisms of industry working: punctuality, conforming to schedules and agendas; office/administration and communication skills; further, career paths were identified or verified and some job offers occurred.

Barriers to learning and employability were identified. All students declared feeling exploited due to low or no-pay. However, exploitation was perceived as a right-of-passage and was not a deterrent to employment, although concerns for students from low-socio economic backgrounds and those lacking family support were noted by questionnaire respondents.

Opinions regarding the report assignment ranged from being useful as a portfolio piece to not seeing the relevance or perceiving the report as a barrier to task performances in the workplace.

Some reports incorporated honesty, frankness, humour and dislike, giving insight into personal experiences and the placement environment. Students

disengaged with the report tended to write objectively with few references to show reflection.

Students on short-term placements appeared to generate as much, or better, reflection than those on year-long placements.

The tutor focus group identified work experience as daunting; preparation should be early alongside developing discipline specific skills and understanding industry terminology; placement learning contributed to increased confidence, efficacy, understanding the design process and realism; improvements to learning from placement included self/student and industry assessment and shorter on-course assignments to simulate industry-working processes/timeframes.

Implications

The aim of the paper was to assess key skills and experiences to support learning and employability.

UK best practice frameworks for quality placements (Hope & Figiel, 2012; Skillset, 2011) and course handbook recommendations were mainly upheld. Findings illustrated student perspectives of placement learning contributed answers to Morley's (2001) question for a definition of core skills. Subsequent questions were derived asking how best practices might be developed and reinforced: How to use and build upon the learning gained from work-based contexts? How does work placement learning articulate with the rest of the curriculum? How are students' work placement experiences, learning and knowledge development best recorded and assessed?

Biggs (2003) describes four kinds of knowledge: declarative, functioning, conditional and procedural;

'Curricula in most universities are overwhelmingly declarative, when really graduates are supposed to be educated so that they can interact thoughtfully with professional problems: to use functioning knowledge, in other words' (p42).

Students on work experience placements are required to demonstrate functioning knowledge although tutor assessment of the experience is through pre-determined, procedural learning outcomes via a format that is more conducive to declarative knowledge development. This leads to a suggestion for a reconfiguration of how placement learning might be assessed.

The conference workshop will facilitate exploration and discussion of a range of extracts from student reflective reports, with aims to: develop understanding of how students conceptualise placement experiences; place value on college-based learning; generate ideas to embed employability within the curriculum and facilitate transferability of academic skills and knowledge into the world of work.

References

Biggs, J.B. (2003). Teaching for Quality Learning at University. Open University Press.

Carrington, N., Thompson, P. & Le Brun, C. (2012). 'EBacc has forced arts off the curriculum' *The Times*. 6 December 2012. p32, Letters to the editor.

Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development (CIPD). (2009). *The Internship Charter* [online] Available from: www.cipd.co.uk/publicpolicy/promoting-productive-internships-internship-charter.htm Accessed on: 18 August 2012.

Gateway to the Professions Collaborative Forum (GPCF) (2011). Common Best Practice Code for High-Quality Internships. London: Trade Union Congress.
Hope, S & Figiel, J. (2012). *Intern culture: A literature review of internship reports, guidelines and toolkits from 2009-2011*. ArtQuest: UAL & ACE.

Kerins, A. T. (2011). *An Adventure in Service-Learning Developing Knowledge, Values and Responsibility.* UK: Gower Publishers Ltd.

London Centre for Arts and Cultural Exchange (LCACE). (2008). Work Placement Toolkit. London: LCACE. http://www.lcace.org.uk/publications/2008/work-placement-toolkit.html

Morley, L. (2001). *Producing New Workers: Quality, equality and employability in higher education.* Quality in Higher Education 7 (2) p131-138.

Skillset (2011). Skillset Code of Practice for Graduate Internships in the Creative Industries. [online] Available from: www.skillset.org/uploads/pdf/asset_14315.pdf Accessed 14 Feb 2013.

UCAS. (2012) *Applicant figures – December,* 18 January 2012 [online] Available from: http://www.ucas.com/about_us/media_enquiries/media_releases/2012/2012applicantfigures Accessed on 18 January 2012