

## Global student employability: Analysing the rhetoric of international placement messages (0059)

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### Introduction:

The problems facing graduates and undergraduate students are three fold. Firstly, there is concern worldwide around the employability skills of graduates. Recently, Woolcock (2014) argued that companies are having difficulty filling graduate vacancies, as students do not have the required employability skills and Luekitinan (2014) notes that there is concern about the readiness of new graduates for work in Asia. In the UK, post Dearing Report in 1997 (NCHIE, 1997), employability became a key tenant and central aspect of university education. One way of achieving this is to offer work placements as part of degree programmes. Additionally, there has been an increasing emphasis on attaining soft and transferable skills by universities and employers (Wilton, 2008).

Secondly, graduates enter a global marketplace and have to compete for graduate roles with fellow graduates from around the world. Ng argues that “the global war for talent is a fierce competition” (2013:281) thus, graduates need to be mobile for work (Luekitinan, 2014).

A third complication is that universities are seeking to internationalise their programmes by offering overseas courses often with consortia (Tadaki and Tremewan, 2013). For example RMIT offers programmes across Asia and Europe ([www.rmit.com](http://www.rmit.com)), with placement options in their home nation and overseas.

Our research rationale is that there is little practical guidance for students when applying for placements in a variety of nations. Furthermore, different countries and institutional partners may have contrasting views on the role of placements in gaining employability skills. Each nation will also have different rules and recruitment procedures around student placements (the UK offers year long placements while; in the US placements are generally 3 or 6 months). Students in the UK may face several rounds of interviews/ assessment centres whereas other countries have one interview round. Thus, there are no formal criteria that students can use to aid the application process as Bullock et al (2009) argue. Companies offer their own information, often pitched to attract the best students. In recent years specialist websites have been developed to help students e.g. Rate my Placement (RMP) or [www.intern.sg](http://www.intern.sg) but these also have their own agenda and often duplicate company information and are often country specific. Whilst, they claim to be independent there is little evidence to support this independence. Thus, how do students know that placement information is credible and how do universities begin to understand the placements offered across different nations?

Our research will focus on understanding placement messages offered to students in the UK and Singapore. The focus on Singapore is three-fold; firstly as Mok and Cheung (2011) argue Asia will emerge as being the centre for the world's leading economies this century. Secondly, Singapore is known as a global schoolhouse (Waring, 2013) with a variety of international consortia degree offerings, including degrees with integrated placements. Thirdly, within Singapore there is an increasing focus on graduate employability and focus of government support for placements as a way of increasing employability skills in the graduate population. The 2015 budget statement establishes that "They {students} will be able to engage in a deeper and more structured internship programme" (2015:22) and "We have to develop much better internship programmes compared to what we have today, to help our students" (Singapore Budget, 2015: 25).

### Source Credibility and Message Framing

Source credibility and message framing theory are offered as a framework to investigate students' interpretation of the work placement messages that are being presented. Source credibility refers to particular information providers being perceived as expert and trustworthy (Kelman, 1961), in this instance employers, recruiters and providers of placement information. This can be defined as the message source's perceived ability to provide accurate and truthful information (Petty & Tormala, 2004). In prior studies, individuals were shown to display greater confidence when the source had high credibility, and this perception determined the persuasion level (Tormala, Briñol, and Petty 2007). Cues such as credible brand names or companies, links and references, and, employee testimonials can serve to reduce risk and increase reassurance to enhance the credibility of both the source and the message. The way information is labelled or framed has been demonstrated to influence judgement and decisions about products (Smith & Petty, 1996). In the context of work placements, we refer to O'Keefe & Jensen (2006) who posit that message framing is the idea that variations in language can be used to highlight the positive or negative consequences of a behaviour. In placements communication, positive frames present the positive consequences of adherence to the message recommendations (e.g., "undertaking a work placement will increase skills and competences relevant to securing a graduate job"), whereas negative frames describe the negative consequences of non-adherence (e.g., "not completing a work placement, will limit the experience, skills and competence necessary to secure a graduate job"). Framing creates a perspective on message content without altering the content itself.

### Research

We offer a comparative analysis of the framing and understanding of the rhetoric of placement messages between Singapore and the UK.

The research was carried out in two stages, firstly content analysis (Krippendorf, 2012) categorised the placement offerings made to students, identified the sources of information and distinguished the framing of the placement messages

as being either positively or negatively framed, in both countries. Secondly, semi-structured interviews (Drever, 2003) enabled an understanding of student perceptions of placements using a purposive sampling strategy (Symon and Cassell, 2012). We applied Ohanian's (1990) three key dimensions of source credibility that focused on perceived expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness to aid our understanding of the students' interpretation of their sources of information. It was important to recognise both the content and the interpretation of such messages to understand if the student experience matches the rhetoric offered by placement employers. We interviewed 10 students in the UK and 10 students in Singapore.

## Conclusion

This research is important, as we are able to identify and analyse the points of difference and similarity between Singapore and the UK in the presentation and interpretation of placement messages that are being consumed by students in their placement job search.

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