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Student-community engagement and graduate employability

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Abstract: This article is about the effects of student-community engagement on the employment prospects of graduates. Its aims are to critically examine the reasons for the belief that student-community engagement enhances graduate employability and to assess the strength of the case for that belief. The article seeks to contribute to the development of a theory of how student-community engagement affects graduate employability. It offers a 'knowledge, skills and attitudes' framework for student-community engagement that can be related to graduate employability. It concludes with lessons to ensure that student-community engagement contributes to the employment progression of students when they graduate.

Keywords: Graduate unemployment, student-community engagement, service learning, work-experience, student-volunteering, community-based projects, social capital.

Introduction

This article is about the impact of student-community engagement (SCE) on the employment prospects of graduates. It examines grounds for the belief that SCE enhances graduate employability. Its goal is to evaluate the strength of the case for that belief.

Why is this an important issue? It is important for at least three reasons. First, it is important to students. They need to know how student-community engagement is likely to affect their employability when they graduate. Moreover, the ease or difficulty that new graduates experience in the labour market in the early months after graduation has a significant impact on their longer term employment prospects.

"Graduates unemployed after six months are typically unemployed for more than one year during the first three and a half years after university. This compares with an average duration of unemployment of one month for graduates who were employed after six months. Unemployment at six months is also associated with a higher probability of employment in a non-graduate occupation in the future. Similarly, unemployment after six months, ceteris paribus, is associated with 16% lower earnings three and a half years after graduation." (Smith, McKnight and Naylor, 2000, p. 403)

Second, it matters to *universities* because graduate employability is an important university performance indicator which affects many factors ranging from league table position to levels of funding. It also matters to universities because graduate employability affects the value of a university's education to its students. And it matters to universities because it affects student demand for courses; a subject or course experiencing rising demand for its graduates is more attractive to potential applicants.

Third, it is important for the success of the community-engagement project within universities. University-community engagement would carry more weight within universities if it transpires that it significantly enhances graduate employability.

What do we really mean by student-community engagement and graduate employability?

The term student-community engagement is potentially troublesome. On the one hand, it is a term that is in common currency with an agreed meaning within university-community circles and this facilitates communication. Also, it is inclusive enough to enable proponents of its different strands to find kindred spirits and make common cause. However, taken literally, it means any form of off-campus activity by students within the community. This includes not only student learning in the community and student volunteering but also competition between students and local people in areas of the city to the exclusion of local people (Smith 2008). So the term 'student-community engagement' may facilitate communication between those within university-community engagement circles but it can impede communication with others who are, understandably, inclined to interpret the term literally. To be clear, in this article the term 'student-community engagement' is defined as student learning through engagement in activities that are intended to convey some benefit(s) to the community. In this sense, it stems from the US model of Service Learning (Battistoni 1995).

Even within this definition there are a range of practices. Some courses of SCE involve well-defined projects whereas others involve simply a period of activity in the community. Some involve student engagement with the *local* community whereas others involve engagement with the *wider* community. Some focus on the *application* of knowledge acquired in the university whereas others focus on the *distillation* of knowledge from the experience of student engagement. Some are based on a single module within a degree programme which students take while continuing with other modules whereas others are more like a sandwich placement i.e. a period of full-time student-community engagement between periods of college-based studies. Probably the most common form is where students take one or more modules within their degree programme to learn from working on a project (or projects) within a community-based organisation.

At the other end of the issue under consideration is the meaning of the term 'graduate employability'. There are those (e.g. Yorke, 2004) who have reservations about the concept because the term can be interpreted in ways that do "not acknowledge that the condition of local, national and international labour markets is a powerful determinant of graduate's success."(p.8). And there are those who make the distinction between the ease with which new graduates find suitable employment after leaving HE and their longer term employment prospects. Hillage and Pollard (1998), for example, see graduate employability as comprising three abilities: (1) gaining initial employment, (2) maintaining employment and (3) obtaining new employment if required. Jones (2008) challenges the term employability altogether as he believes it implies blame directed at the students, along the lines of "if you don't get a job it is because you are not currently employable and therefore carry some level of fault that needs correcting". Purcell and Elias (2002) point out that graduates of different disciplines tend to differ in the time they take to get a 'graduate job' and for some it might take much longer than a few months. While the difficulties graduates experience finding initial employment could be seen as a transitory problem of adjustment, evidence from Smith et al (2000, cited above), indicates that the ease or difficulty that new graduates experience in the labour market in the early months after graduation has a significant impact on their longer term employment prospects.

In terms of its importance to students, universities and community-university engagement projects, the most appropriate definition of graduate employability is probably the most

straightforward one, i.e. the ability of students to gain graduate employment after they graduate.

Reasons to believe

Are there any reasons for thinking that the experience of SCE will enhance the employability of the students when they graduate? There are at least three. First, some of the students will make contacts through their projects that lead to employment after university. This is a form of social capital – the building of ‘social networks and norms of reciprocity (which) can facilitate co-operation for mutual benefit’ (Putnam 1993:21). Such contacts and networks can be organisational or personal. At one end of the spectrum is the position of the student who is offered employment on the staff of the organisation which provided their engagement project. In this case SCE gave the student an opportunity to *showcase* their talents and potential which were recognised by the organisation. At the other end, is the student who, in the course of their student-project, makes friends with someone who is able later to draw their attention to a suitable opening, not necessarily in the same organisation. This is an example of how SCE can extend students' networks outside the student community and these are an important resource. This form of social capital is particularly valuable to students from social backgrounds which convey relatively little of the sort of social capital that facilitates finding graduate employment, as evidenced in the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) research into HE access and participation (Brennan and Shah, 2003).

Second, SCE enables students to *discover* talents and strengths that would not be recognised so easily in their subject-centred studies. For example, a computer studies undergraduate may discover they have a talent for active listening and empathy, a student of history may discover that one of their strengths is being calm in a crisis and a philosophy student may find they are very good at project-planning. SCE enables the students of an academic discipline to undertake a range of different activities in a different context which can enable them to recognise additional talents and strengths. It also provides them with *evidence* of these. Evidence of talents and strengths are the heart of a good CV. A student who's CV claims a wide range of talents and strengths, and evidence to support such claims, is in a relatively strong position in the graduate labour market.

Third, the experience of SCE provides an opportunity to *acquire* a range of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are valued by employers. The main purpose of student learning through community-based activities is to equip the students with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to make a difference to the lives of those in the community which includes, of course, their own lives. What sort of knowledge, skills and attitudes?

Knowledge

- (1) *Knowledge that enables students to make a difference.* Since this is likely to depend on context (particularly time and place) it is more important for students to know where and how to find things out from a range of sources than to absorb a limited body of established principles or theory applicable to a particular subject.
- (2) *Knowledge distilled from experience.* Whereas traditional university education elevates the sort of knowledge found in academic journals and textbooks, SCE prioritises the sort of knowledge that is distilled from experience.
- (3) *Self-knowledge.* What sort of knowledge would be most helpful in enabling students to make a difference? Knowledge that is specific to the student's role in the community-based issue on which they are working. The most specific knowledge of all is a student's knowledge of themselves, including understanding their own talents,

strengths and weaknesses. The main instrument for change that students will bring to every future situation is themselves which makes it vital that they know about their own strengths and weaknesses.

Skills

- (1) *Reflective thinking and strategic thinking skills.* These are the key thinking skills needed to make a difference (See Bourner, 2009). They are needed to develop strategies, plans and actions to realise the goals students set themselves and they are needed to capture the lessons of their experience in the community. Like critical thinking they are both forms of question-based thinking but the searching questions needed for reflective thinking and strategic thinking are, of course, different¹.
- (2) *Listening skills.* Writing for an academic audience is particularly valued within traditional university education. By contrast, other forms of communication skills are more valued by SCE; listening skills, oral skills and the ability to respond with action are of particular value to those who would seek to make a difference .
- (3) *Personal transferable skills.* Enhancing students' abilities to make a difference after they graduate means preparing them for problems, situations and contexts that cannot normally be predicted far in advance. Strong transferable skills enable a person to make a difference in a wide spectrum of employment situations.

Attitudes

- (1) *Desire to make a difference.* It is one thing to develop the capacity to make a difference and another to have the disposition or inclination to do so. By making students more aware of conditions in their community SCE enhances the motivation to contribute to change within the wider community.
- (2) *Proactivity.* A proactive attitude equips students with a bias for action – a clear asset for those who aspire to make a difference.
- (3) *Commitment.* A person's ability to make a difference is enhanced by a commitment to the changes they seek to make ... and if they are passionate in their commitment then so much the better.

In summary, SCE contributes to developing a graduate who has learned where and how to find knowledge from a wide range of sources, how to capture knowledge from their own experience and, in so doing, has acquired significant self-knowledge, including knowledge of their particular talents and strengths. She or he has acquired skills that are transferable to a wide range of situations including the ability to form a strategy or plan and the ability to listen in ways that lets the people they are speaking with know they have been understood. Moreover, this graduate recognises the value of action when they want to make a difference. This is the sort of graduate who is likely to be particularly successful in the graduate employment market.

So far this section has unpacked the belief that student-community engagement may enhance graduate employability. It has done so by examining reasons that underpin that belief. But are there any reasons to believe that it might actually reduce graduate employability? What factors are on the other side of the scales?

¹They are explored in Bourner (2009).

First, students who enroll for SCE units or modules might be diverted from their subject-specific studies. If they find their work in the community particularly engaging this could, at least in theory, distract them from their other modules. It is easy to see how SCE can support some academic subjects, such as social studies and offer a field of application for others, such as computer studies where, for example, a student might set up a web-site for a community group. But, there are some subjects such as maths or physics where the relationship is more tenuous and the student's attention may be diverted from subject-specific endeavour which could result in their leaving university with a poorer degree which damages their prospects for employment or higher academic study.

There are two other reasons why students might show up less well in the statistics published annually on the 'First Destinations' of graduates². The first is that they might choose community engagement *because* they have less interest in their primary subject discipline and hence be less likely to get good degrees than those who are more focused on that discipline.

The second is that students who are attracted to community engagement might be a self-selected group who place less weight on their own material advancement. As such, they may be less driven in making the transition from university into graduate employment than those who are more ambitious and impatient to progress their own careers.

Consequently, while there are strong reasons to believe that SCE enhances graduate employability as recorded in the 'First Destinations' statistics there are also reasons to be cautious about such claims. And this leads to the next question, is there any empirical evidence that relates, directly or indirectly, to the issue?

Looking for evidence

Firm quantitative evidence of the link from SCE to securing meaningful employment in the UK is sparse. There is a large amount of anecdotal evidence from those working in the field, of students who have been offered permanent roles with the community-based organisations for whom they have been working as part of their studies. One or two in each group (possibly 5 to 10 percent) are offered some kind of part- or full-time work and often the organisation is prepared to wait a year or two until the student has finished their studies. Likewise, there is anecdotal evidence that students who have undertaken SCE are at least as successful in terms of the degree classifications they attain as other student and possibly more so. In other words, there is no anecdotal evidence that SCE distracts students from the other parts of their studies. All this, however, *is* anecdotal at least in the context of UK higher education³. It is true that the academic staff who are the source of the anecdotes are the ones with most experience of SCE and the students involved but they are also the ones who wish to promote SCE within Higher Education and therefore they have a vested interest in finding and articulating the positives.

If, instead of looking for direct evidence of the impact of SCE on graduate employability, we seek indirect evidence then the natural place to search is amongst the research on work-experience on graduate employability. This is because SCE involves students working on a

² These statistics, published by the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA), record the employment and other destinations of graduates at the end of the year in which they completed their degree courses..

³ Systematic research in the USA, however, has found that students who completed modules in service learning do better on their degree courses overall. For example, Astin et al (2000) found that such students obtained significantly higher GPA (grade point average) scores than other students.

project (or projects) within a community-based organisation. They therefore gain work-experience as part of their SCE.

Early studies on work-experience on graduate employment focused on the effects of sandwich placements. A sandwich course is any course of higher education in which a period of supported work experience is sandwiched between periods of academic study within the university. The early studies were pretty unequivocal that it enhanced graduate employability, at least in terms of reducing the likelihood that graduates would still be unemployed six months after graduation (e.g. Bourner, 1982). Recent research confirms that sandwich placements continue to confer employment advantage on students. For example, Ward (2006) looked at the impact of sandwich placements in four areas at the University of Huddersfield: Applied Science, Art and Design, Computer Engineering and Business Studies. She found that there were 14 percent more 'sandwich' graduates in jobs than other graduates (80 percent compared to 66 percent), that students who undertook a practical period were more likely to gain a managerial, professional or senior post and were quicker overall in securing a job. Moreover, graduate salaries were generally higher for students who took a placement year, particularly in the social sciences, with average salaries ranging from £12.6K for students without graduate placement experience to £17K for students with placement experience.

Bowes and Harvey (1999) examined the first destination returns for all those who qualified for a degree in 1995-96 and found that six months after graduation there were about 15 percent more graduates of sandwich degrees in jobs than graduates of degrees without sandwich placements (almost 70 percent for sandwich students as opposed to 55 percent). It seems that sandwich students are advantaged in employment at least at the start of their careers.

The Bowes and Harvey (1999) study also suggested that the extent of this advantage varied across subjects with more vocational subjects enjoying the most advantage. They found the employment advantage was greatest in vocational fields of built environment, business, engineering and semi-vocational fields like social sciences and least in subjects like science and languages where there seemed to be no significant advantage at all. This conclusion, however, has not been uncontested. A study by Blasko, et al (2002) was based on a nationally representative sample of students graduating from undergraduate degrees in 1995/96 who were questioned 3 to 4 years after they graduated about their employment experience. This study confirmed that for graduates as a whole there were significant employment advantages to be gained from a substantial period of work experience in HE but found that the benefits were greatest for those on *non*-vocational courses.

A more recent study by Mason et al. (2003) looked at 5 subject fields: business studies, computer science, design studies, biological sciences and history. It involved not only HESA first destinations data but also interviews, a telephone survey of graduates and a survey of their line managers. The results yet again showed that sandwich placement work experience was strongly associated with employment status amongst the newly graduated. However, this advantage eroded over time and could no longer be detected amongst graduates who had graduated over three years earlier.

Dearing (1997) strongly advocated that work experience should be made available to more students. In February 2000 the Secretary of State for Education and Employment called for all higher education to include a period of work experience. It seems reasonable to infer 'official' recognition that students benefit from work experience.

However, not all work experience is equal. On the basis of the empirical evidence it would seem reasonable to conclude that a substantial period of work experience integrated into a course of higher education is positively associated with an easier transition from the

university into the world of work. At the other end of the spectrum is vacation employment and part-time work undertaken during a course of study undertaken for the money rather than for the experience. The latter is often casual employment including for example, temping and barwork. And according to Brennan and Shah (2003) "a relatively small amount of work-experience unrelated to study seems to be worse than none at all"

It is interesting to note that the proportion of the undergraduate population in the UK enrolled on sandwich first degrees is less than 10 per cent and has been falling in recent years (Little, 2008) whereas the proportion of students who undertake part-time work during term-time continues to rise.

Brennan and Shah (2003) found that gaining work experience had more positive employment consequences for younger students and those from higher social classes than for mature students and those from lower social class backgrounds. This is consistent with a picture in which the more advantaged students secure benefits by widening their experience through employment whereas for the less advantaged students it is an additional pressure that distracts their attention and energies from their academic studies.

Where does SCE fit into the work-experience spectrum? Is it more like the sandwich placement experience or more like holding down a part-time job alongside a programme of higher education? The diversity of SCE practices makes this a difficult question to answer without specifying the particular form of SCE in question. We shall therefore focus on what we believe to be the most common form whereby students take one or more modules within their degree programme to learn from working on a project (or projects) within a community-based organisation. In this case, the SCE is certainly integrated into the student's course of study (rather than being an additional extra), there will be some form(s) of support for the students and their learning and the learning outcomes will normally be assessed and recorded. On the other hand, SCE usually involves relatively short periods of time actually working on the community-based project(s).

The upshot of this discussion is that to convey employment advantage the work-experience needs to (1) be integrated into the programme of higher education, (2) be sufficiently long to provide a range of experience, (3) be supported by the university through supervision or by some other means and (4) provide some means by which the work-based experience can be transformed into work-based learning. Shortly, we shall see how SCE scores on these criteria.

The other main field that is likely to yield some evidence on SCE and graduate employability is student volunteering. Insofar as student volunteering takes place within the community (as opposed to, say voluntary work *within* a university campus) it is a form of student engagement within the community.

Student volunteering is not the same as SCE but it has enough in common to suggest that we can learn about SCE and student employability from the study of student learning and employability. It should however be borne in mind that not all student volunteering is necessarily integrated into the student's curriculum of studies, nor is attention necessarily paid to distilling learning outcomes and nor is it necessarily accredited.

Student volunteering may be ad hoc work, possibly organised by a students' union, it may be organised externally to the programme of study or it may be accredited by a university. Many university student unions have set up student-led voluntary groups to run voluntary activities within local communities.

Student volunteering plays a significant role in the lives of a substantial proportion of the student population in the UK. Figures from the 2008-09 Citizenship Survey show that 49 per

cent of students reported taking part in formal volunteering at least once in that year and 30 per cent took part once a month or more (Drever, 2010, p. 76).

There is much evidence that volunteering can provide individuals with skills that should support their entry into the labour market. The development of new skills is consistently found to be a prime motivator and benefit of volunteering by surveys of volunteers (Low et al, 2007). These include not only hard skills such as gathering and analyzing data (Jastrzab, 2004) and IT (Rochester, 2009) but also soft skills such as managing time (Jastrzab, 2004), communication and teamwork (v,2008) and organisation skills (Rochester, 2009). There is also considerable evidence that volunteering has a positive impact on 'attitudinal' factors such as student confidence and purpose (Hirst, 2001 and Rochester, 2009).

According to Brennan and Shah (2003) participation in some extra-curriculum activities also has a positive impact on employment prospects: a good-looking CV, yielding contacts, building confidence and producing competencies and skills are valued by employers. Overall, students from all social classes spending more than 10 hours a week on extra-curricular activities "were particularly likely to be more successful in their subsequent employment" (Brennan and Shah, 2003, p. 15).

There is certainly a strong *belief* amongst the volunteers themselves that volunteering enhances employment prospects. Studies by Gay (1998), Hirst (2001), Ockenden (2007) and v (2008) found that volunteers generally believed that volunteering had a positive effect on employment progression.

A recent study by Brewis et al published in November 2010 confirmed these findings. It was based on a survey of students (3083 usable responses) and university alumni (5,242 usable responses) and found that:

"Volunteering provides experiences that graduates can utilize when looking for work: 82 per cent of recent graduates under 30 years old mentioned volunteering on a CV and 78 per cent talked about it in interview. Half (51 per cent) of recent graduates under 30 who are in paid work say that volunteering helped them to secure employment" (Brewis et al, p. viii)

The belief in the positive link between student volunteering and graduate employability seems to be shared by employers. Students who have undertaken voluntary work can be particularly attractive to some employers, even more so than students who have undertaken other forms of work experience:

"Recent research among 200 of the UK's top businesses shows that three quarters of employers prefer to recruit candidates who have undertaken voluntary work experience. Over half think that voluntary work can be more valuable than paid work.." (Reed Executive, quoted in Harvey, Locke and Morey, 2002, p.35).

One recent survey found that 90 per cent of employers believed that volunteering could have a positive effect on career progression (v,2008).

This belief seems to be shared by government and policy-making bodies. Research for the former Department for Education and Skills (DFES) found that 54 percent of volunteers believed that volunteering had helped or will help them get a job and 41 percent of those who were employed believed their volunteering helped them to get a job. It concluded that "voluntary activity can improve an individual's ability to gain, maintain or improve their employment (Hirst, 2001).

According to this research, student volunteering was most likely to improve employability when: (1) the volunteering contained a variety of experience, (2) it spanned 50 hours or more, (3) was for more than one organisation, (4) it involved working with the public, (5) it involved a review of the voluntary activity and (6) it involved working as part of a team (Hirst, 2001). It would seem that the wider the range of experience within the volunteering activities the greater the employment advantage conveyed.

Student volunteering has also received official blessing by HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council of England) which set up the Higher Education Active Community Fund (HEACF) to encourage students to engage in community work. Moreover, there are a range of national bodies which support and encourage voluntary work by students, including Community Service Volunteers, Millennium Volunteers and Student Volunteering UK.

Overall then, such evidence as exists suggests that, on balance, student volunteering enhances the employability of students. There must be reservations about this optimistic conclusion, however, as it ignores variations amongst the students and amongst the volunteering schemes. The former is illustrated by another finding in the Brennan and Shah (2003) study; the employment advantage of extracurricular activities did not seem to extend to mature students with significant home commitments for whom extra-curricula activities were generally more of an additional pressure than a future benefit. And the issue about variation in the nature of the volunteering schemes is similar to that of work experience discussed above. Not all student volunteering is equal. At one end of the spectrum is a model of accredited voluntary work (such as the Voluntary Service Learning module in the first year of the Sociology degree at Liverpool University) and the other end is volunteering undertaken by students which is short-term and ad hoc.

Also, most of the evidence is about *perceptions* rather than about a direct statistical link between volunteering and graduate employment:

"Unfortunately, these positive perceptions from volunteers, policy makers and some employers for the direct link between volunteering and employment are not always backed up by the evidence. The combination of a relative dearth of systematic research into the link and mixed results from the research that has been undertaken makes firm conclusions impossible. The three largest quantitative surveys in the UK to date (Gay and Hatch, 1983; Gay, 1998; Hirst, 2001) all fail to establish a direct statistical link between volunteering and job outcomes." (Hill, 2009)

There is much less research on the impact on graduate employability of student volunteering than work-experience more generally. But work-experience is, of course, an important factor in how student volunteering impacts on graduate employability. From the available evidence, many employers seem to regard student volunteering as a sort of 'work-experience plus'. Other things being equal they are favourably disposed towards job candidates who have gained their work experience by means of student volunteering. Moreover, student learning from a programme of community engagement normally includes a structured approach to reflection and learning and this is not normally present in a programme of volunteering (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996) so this conclusion probably understates the real impact of SCE on graduate employability.

Conclusions and discussion

The aim of this article was to explore the relationship between SCE and graduate employment. This link is important for universities that are concerned about the employability of their students; it is important for those with an interest in university-community engagement and it is important, of course, for the students themselves. The article has focused on student-community engagement where students take on one or more

modules within their degree programme to learn from working on a project (or projects) within a community-based organisation. And it has focused on the ability of students to gain employment after university.

In principle, SCE can increase forms of social capital that enhance employability, it can provide an opportunity for students to discover talents and strengths that are valued by employers but which would not be recognised so easily in their subject-centred studies and it can provide an opportunity to gain knowledge, skills and attitudes that are valued by employers. On the other hand, it could, in theory, divert student's attention and energies from their subject-specific studies. Empirical evidence in the USA suggests the reverse i.e. that it contributes to student academic success elsewhere in their subject-specific studies (Astin et al, 2000). We could find no systematic studies on the impact of SCE on graduate employability in the UK to test the anecdotal evidence that SCE enhances graduate employability and possibly also overall degree performance. However, there *are* relevant studies of the impact of work-experience and student volunteering on graduate employability from which lessons may be drawn.

Most of the empirical research has focused on the link between work-experience and graduate employability. Such research as has been done on the impact of student volunteering on graduate employability is consistent with the research on work experience with the additional finding that a substantial proportion of employers prefer to recruit candidates who have gained their work experience through volunteering activities.

As a very broad generalisation the evidence indicates that work-experience does enhance graduate employability but it does so more for some students than for others and it does so more for some forms of work-experience than others. All work-experience is not equal. At one end of the spectrum is a substantial period of college-supported work-experience aimed at widening the student's experience and integrated into a programme of higher education, as exemplified by the 'thick sandwich' degree. At the other end is casual work, such as temping or barwork, undertaken in addition to a course of higher education and with the main aim of raising money. In other words, work experience can mean a structured period of supervised work experience integrated into a programme of HE and it can also mean casual work to earn money. The empirical evidence indicates that the former conveys an advantage to students in their transition from university to the world of employment whereas the latter is, if anything, a disadvantage.

What is the difference that makes the difference? There seems to be several factors that differentiate the sort of work experience that enhances graduate employability. First it is integrated within the student's programme of studies. Second, the student are supervised, or otherwise supported by the university, during the work experience. Third the main aim is to widen student's experience rather than earn money. Fourth attention is paid to distilling the learning from the experience.

There are some important lessons here to ensure that SCE contributes employment advantage to the students when they graduate. First, it needs to be structured within the student's programme of studies rather than being an 'add-on'. The sort of work-experience that seemed to convey most employment advantage was the sandwich placement where a period work-experience is interleaved with a periods of academic study. Typically SCE is not integrated in this 'serial' way but is integrated in a 'parallel' way as students take one module of SCE alongside several subject-specific modules. The important point, however, seems to be that the experience that SCE offers should not be in addition to the demands of the academic course. The evidence in the literature suggests that the latter arrangement can disadvantage mature students, particularly those with domestic commitments and students from poorer backgrounds.

Second, students and student learning needs to be supported by the university during their SCE experience. This could be by visits from supervisors (in the way that sandwich students are typically supported by placement tutors) or occasional workshops for SCE cohorts or action learning sets that rotate around the community-based organisations or in some other ways. On-line support is an attractive option but it is not yet clear how effective it is in providing the sort of emotional support that is appropriate when the going gets difficult for a student who is feeling isolated from the university and other students.

Third, the SCE experience needs to widen student experience. There is all the difference in the world between 50 hours of student experience working in a community-based organisation and one hour of student experience repeated 50 times. This is one reason why SCE so often focuses on project-based work; it ensures sufficient variety of experience. By contrast, work that is too repetitious does not provide the necessary range of experience. It might be very helpful for a community-based organisation to have someone to take care of all the photocopying but this experience would be too limited for a programme of SCE. Insufficient variety of experience is presumably a significant part of the reason that most casual work does not offer the sort of employment advantage that sandwich placements convey.

Fourth, SCE needs to offer a structured approach to reflection and learning. In other words, provision needs to be made for the students to distil significant learning outcomes from their SCE. It is this aspect of SCE that seems to make a significant difference to the acquisition of knowledge, skills and capabilities that are not present in simpler forms of volunteering (Bringle and Hatcher 1996).

Little's (2006) survey of employability and work-based learning concluded that:

"Work experience is not necessary intrinsically beneficial. It is the learning that an individual derives from the experience that is important." (Little, 2006, p. 14).

An important difficulty in distilling lessons from the literatures on work-based learning and student volunteering has been that there are many different forms of work-based learning and student volunteering and some of studies have treated each as a homogeneous variable. It has become apparent that different forms of work-based learning and student volunteering have different impacts on graduate employability. There is no reason why this should be any less true of SCE.

At the end of this article we still cannot be entirely certain about the impact of SCE on graduate employability. That would require primary research to fill the gap that exists on this issue. The research on work-experience and student volunteering informs us that such research would be best if it could to differentiate within it between different groups of students (including by age and by social class background) and different forms of SCE. However, we *are* left with the clear impression that the weight of argument and evidence supports the view that SCE has a positive impact on student employability, at least initially. It looks as if the most common form of SCE yields employability gains comparable with the better forms of work-experience and its affinity with student volunteering may raise its advantage further.

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