learning on a work placement

Nick Sutcliffe and Shelagh Brooke

Introduction

This paper is based upon the experiences of a group of employers and students on a work placement module. It forms part of the evaluation of an accredited module within a programme leading to the award of a pre-vocational competence-based degree at a post-1992 university.

Although this particular course focuses on health and social care, the work placement element involves principles which are applicable to a wide range of programmes; evidence-based assessment through the use of a learning portfolio is a feature of this degree.

The work placement module

This module consists of a work placement lasting approximately 11 weeks; for successful completion, students are awarded 60 undergraduate credits at Level 2. The module is part of a competence-based degree, key features of which are: (i) the involvement of employers at all stages; (ii) curriculum design based on learning outcomes; (iii) accreditation of work-based learning; (iv) negotiation of learning outcomes; (v) mentor support for students; and (vi) portfolio building.

The evaluation of the work placement

The evaluation was carried out following the students' return to the university at the end of their work placement. An external evaluator, one of the authors, was appointed to gather data from the students and the placement providers.

Data were collected from the students through questionnaires, focus group interviews and the Delphi technique. Delphi involves collecting individual responses and having participants rank their collected responses as a group, in order of importance.

Results

Students commented that in general, they felt well prepared for their placements, though some felt that their placement providers had not read the handbook that they had been provided with and that this led to ambiguity about the placement on both sides. One student noted that they felt that there was "a certain 'harshness' in the world of work that I didn't feel prepared for". Other students noted that learning outcomes could perhaps have been more specifically 'customised' for individual placements in their discussions with tutors and placement providers.

Commenting on the quality of preparation for the placement, students said that this gave them more confidence during the placement, and that the patience, empathy and communication skills they had developed were all of great use.

Most students felt that what they were doing at university generally tied in well with what they were asked to do in the work placement. They noted that different organisations interpreted the theory/practice relationship in different ways and they also recognised the relevance to the workplace of social/ethical issues covered on their course, such as confidentiality and respecting the rights of others. Some students spent a lot of time doing administrative/clerical work which they felt was not directly relevant, and in some cases there appeared to be a mismatch between the students' view and the placement supervisor's view of what the student ought to be doing.

Students were provided with a university mentor during the placement and the majority of respondents found this very helpful. Additional comments suggested that students were reassured by the knowledge that help was at hand: "a shoulder to cry on when things were not going so well on the placement". The impartiality of mentors (who were not directly involved in the placement) was also highly valued; in some cases they mediated between student and placement provider.

The module learning outcomes were viewed as very relevant to the placement experience by most students, though student opinions were divided: some felt that some of the things represented in the learning outcomes were difficult to evidence (e.g. anti-discriminatory practice, confidentiality) and that some of the outcomes (e.g. those relating to an understanding of managerial structure) were irrelevant and that there was too wide a variety of placements to impose specific outcomes.

Students' comments on things that could be improved for future placements were, in order of frequency of occurrence:

- Before starting the placement, students should meet the university mentor and placement provider together
- A smaller, easier to read handbook needs to be

provided for placement providers so that they are more likely to take the time to read it properly

- Supervisors should be given more detail about the rest of the course and what is expected of the students and placement provider supervisors while they are in the workplace.

In the course of the Delphi activity the following were identified by the students as the most useful elements of the work placement:

- The work placement enabled them to put skills that they had learned at the university (e.g. assertiveness) into practice
- They felt as though they were gaining 'real' experience, time management skills improved, organisational skills improved
- They were given responsibility for projects; being trusted was particularly important and satisfying.

The following were identified by the students as the most problematic elements of the work placement:

- Some students felt like 'spare parts' when they first arrived
- Their role in the workplace was rather unclear to colleagues, especially at first, and employers tended to underestimate their capabilities
- Collecting evidence was sometimes difficult
- There were social and racial issues which were not dealt with satisfactorily in the placement and too much 'stereotyping' of clients.

Key issues arising for placement provider staff were that:

- The providers viewed very positively the university's movement towards an emphasis on skills and competencies
- There was substantial evidence that the students had benefited from this approach in key areas such as communication and their orientation to the workplace
- Opportunities for the students to review, reflect and analyse should be built into the placement
- As the placement progresses, students could be encouraged to undertake more challenging and complex tasks so that they can evidence their development.

Issues arising from the work placement and their implications for work-based learning

The evaluation suggests that, in general, the work placement was a satisfactory experience both for students and for placement providers. Employers clearly welcomed the emphasis that was being placed on the development of the students' personal skills and competencies.

A major issue emerging from the study was the need to create effective mechanisms to establish, articulate and align the expectations of students, placement providers and university-based staff prior to the placement, particularly in relation to assessment, so as to minimise difficulties at a later stage. Purposes should be clearly articulated and shared through dialogue and documentation (Atkins, 1995) to avoid work-based learning and its assessment being regarded as a 'bolt-on' activity (Betts & Smith, 1998).

The findings suggest that while the adequate preparation of students, work-based supervisors and university-based mentors before the placement may be relatively time-consuming, there are clear benefits as it can prevent misunderstandings and 'mismatches'. For example, the necessity for students to be given specific duties to undertake had not been understood from the outset by some work-based supervisors who were used to students visiting their organisations in an observational capacity. This typifies the challenges, identified by Bloxham and Boyd (2008), of embedding innovative assessment practice across a range of diverse settings and contexts so as to meet the quality standards and internal systems requirements of universities.

Assessment can be problematic where students are unfamiliar with the assessment methods used and their ethos (McDowell and Mowl, 1995) and therefore the work placement needs to form an integral part of the course rather than having its assessed element 'bolted-on'. In this study, the collection of appropriate supporting evidence within a learning portfolio was a crucial factor in ensuring the successful completion of the work placement. The students had undertaken extensive preparation for this in modules prior to the placement. However, there remained some areas of uncertainty and anxiety which were reflected in their comments.

In establishing a common understanding of the purposes of the placement, and the procedures involved, factors such as language may be an issue. Statements which appear to be clear and unambiguous to one group may prove to be difficult to comprehend and excluding to another. Some students commented on the difficulties of interpretation created by language and the variable familiarity of work-based supervisors with the 'jargon' associated with higher education. Mechanisms for overcoming this could include field-testing the documents to be used by those involved with the placement, and a general awareness of, and sensitivity to, the use of language which is highly context-specific.

At quite an early stage in the placement described in this study, the student, the work-based supervisor and the university-based mentor met to discuss opportunities for providing assessable evidence for the learning outcomes, exemplifying the good practice of shared understanding within the context of assessment highlighted by Brennan and Little (1996).

The work placements offered valuable learning opportunities for the students and enabled them to provide evidence of learning in 'real-world' situations. There remain issues to be addressed in relation to crossing the 'cultural divide' between the workplace and the classroom but the findings of this study suggest that good communication and maintaining an ongoing dialogue are important factors in mediating this aspect.

Acknowledgements

References

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Nick Sutcliffe
Strategic Leader, Teacher CPD and Principal Lecturer
Carnegie Faculty of Sport & Education

Shelagh Brooke
Principal Lecturer in Health Sciences
School of Human & Health Sciences
University of Huddersfield