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## Enhancing employability through placements in higher education

Welcome to this special edition of *Higher Education, Skills and Work-based Learning* focusing on enhancing employability by undertaking a work placement while studying at university. In July 2013 the University of Huddersfield hosted a conference on the same theme; the quality of papers presented highlighted the depth and breadth of innovative practice within higher education and subsequently led to the idea of showcasing work in this field through a special edition journal. It is hoped that the experience shared in the papers presented here will contribute to ongoing curriculum development and employability based initiatives to ensure students are supported in becoming employable graduates of the future.

Successfully securing employment upon completing university studies can be a challenge at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. Qualifications, skills and abilities solely acquired in a university setting are now viewed as insufficient by many organisations (Tomlinson, 2008) who increasingly demand workplace experience as a pre-requisite for employment (Confederation of British Industry, 2011). It is pleasing to see High Fliers Research (2014) reporting a recent recovery in the UK graduate market with the number of positions available being at their highest since the 2007 recession. However, 37 per cent of positions in the top 100 graduate recruiting organisations will be taken by students who have already worked for the organisation; emphasising the importance of the relationship between workplace experience and graduate employment. Neill and Mulholland (2003) believe that skills acquired in the workplace have a greater impact upon personal development and increase employability as students can better appreciate the impact of their actions when undertaken in the real world rather than the classroom; a point of view supported by recent graduate recruitment patterns where students with experience of the workplace appear to have an employment advantage.

The traditional approach to combining workplace experience and study, particularly at undergraduate level, has been the sandwich placement where a full year is spent in industry. Due to the length and nature of a sandwich placement it is still viewed by many as the most effective approach to gaining workplace experience while studying (Little and Harvey, 2006). With rising fees, a competitive job market and an ever more diverse student body, engaging students with the sandwich placement process has been challenging (Walker and Bowerman, 2010) with many institutions developing alternative placement experiences to incorporate work-based learning into the curriculum. Summer internships, shorter placements, live project work with companies and volunteering modules are just a few examples of initiatives to improve employability and set academic university learning into the context of the workplace. The six papers presented here consider a range of projects showcasing current research and developments in the field.

Collaboration between universities and industry is recommended to enhance the student experience (Wilson, 2012) ensuring time at university not only equips students with knowledge and skills in their subject area but also prepares them for entry into the workplace. Richard Mendez and Sarah Tudor's paper uses the win-win principles of Stephen Covey to evaluate two different approaches to employer engagement at their respective universities. The paper outlines strategies for working with industry with the research outcomes demonstrating that all parties should benefit from collaboration between universities and employers, including the students, if engagement is effectively designed.

Undertaking a placement has an impact on the development of a wide range of employability skills in students and in his article Matt Edwards focuses on one aspect: student self-efficacy. After being on placement students reported increased levels of confidence, particularly in relation to applying for jobs upon completing their studies and feeling confident in their ability to gain employment. In contrast, Nick Wilton's paper considers placements and their role in the development of employability from an employer rather than a student perspective. Emphasis tends to be placed upon developing student abilities during their time at university but this should be undertaken with a clear understanding of employer's needs and recruitment practices in the process.

Placements do not necessarily have to be for a full academic year to enhance student employability. Judith Shawcross and Tom Ridgman discuss a framework to understand the learning gained through short industrial placements at masters level where students were presented with live and significant issues to resolve for the organisation in the short time they were there. While Tina Byrom and Verity Aiken's case study paper examines the challenges faced in a curriculum redesign in which they work towards scaffolding a meaningful work-based experience into an education course, stressing the importance of including all stakeholder views in the development.

Finally Sara Smith and Jan Martin's paper focuses on strategies to support reflective practice by students while on placement to develop their practitioner capability. Critical reflective practice is an essential part of the placement process as students need to appreciate their personal development and be able to articulate their skills and abilities if they are to fully demonstrate their employability to potential employers.

Each paper contributes to some critical debates in furthering the development of authentic work related experience for students. The importance of developing mutually beneficial relationships with industry, incorporating the views of all stakeholders in curriculum development, strategies for the development of reflection by students and the development of alternative approaches are all discussed. Higher education institutions must maintain relevant policies and practices that meet the needs of students and employers and the initiatives discussed in this issue demonstrate the breadth of practice and innovation in the sector to enhance student employability.

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I am very aware that without our reviewers' time, effort and expertise we would be unable to publish the high quality, original research which *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning* is increasingly offering. Thank you very much to the whole of our reviewer panel, but in particular those who reviewed papers for the three issues of Volume 4, you did a fantastic job.

Very best wishes.

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