STUDENT TERM-TIME WORKING

Integrating term-time working into graduate employability

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Abstract

Government is seeking to improve graduate employability. With work placements for undergraduates struggling to keep up with the expansion in student numbers, term-time working can potentially provide a significant source of employability skills. In recent years, reflecting changes such as the imposition of student fees and ending of maintenance grants, an increasing proportion of students are working. At Northumbria University, for example, research shows that around 60% of undergraduates take a job during term-time.

Our project builds on previous research into *Students in the Labour Market,* undertaken by the Northern Economic Research Unit (NERU), and based on interviews with students and employers. For this project, a sample of employers were interviewed with regard to student employability issues. The views of employers were also sought regarding developing more formalised links (i.e. with particular degree course programmes) in relation to student term-time working, as a means of pursuing employability (and other) outcomes. A survey of activity related to employability in other English universities was also undertaken and the findings are incorporated into a discussion of the way forward on this issue.

Introduction

This paper presents the findings of an HEROBC-funded project that builds on previous and ongoing survey-based research by NERU relating to *Students in the Labour Market* (e.g. DfEE 2000). It has three main objectives:

1. To examine the extent to which/manner in which student term-time working currently contributes to graduate employability.

2. To consider how such experience could be developed into an effective vehicle for achieving 'employability' among students.

3. To use these findings to design a framework of practical actions for improving students' employability relevant to the various schools in the University, thereby helping to ensure consistency and enhanced quality.

The extent to which students engage in term-time working (TTW) has shown a significant increase over recent years. An ongoing longitudinal study of student working (based on a large-scale cohort survey of Northumbria University undergraduates undertaken by the Northern Economic Research Unit annually during 1998-2002) reveals that around 50% of the University's students were involved in term-time working at the time of the March 2001 survey, with the figure rising to 60% for those who had worked *at some time* during the university year. This figure is a significant increase on 1999 when 37% of students were working (and 54% had worked at some stage during the university year) (DfEE 2000). A key

factor driving this development is the change in the funding regime relating to higher education; in particular, the switch from grants to student loans and the imposition of fees. Whatever the motivation, the facts are clear: TTW is becoming a regular experience for an increasing proportion of students at Northumbria, and more generally within the sector. This growth in TTW is occurring at a time when, partly because of the increase in student numbers, universities have been finding it difficult to identify a sufficient number of suitable placement opportunities. Given the increasing emphasis being placed upon employability among graduates, it is natural to consider whether TTW offers a means by which such skills can be developed (and accredited) among students.

It is the contention of this paper that (1) there may be potential benefits to investigating ways of formally recognising the generic skills entailed in the routine jobs filled by the vast majority of students undertaking term-time work, and (2) greater gains in terms of developing employability may be available where it is possible for universities to build a relationship with employers which specifically seeks to utilise students' skills more intensively.

Methodology

For the current project, interviews were conducted with a sample of 20 employers, identified from workplace information supplied by respondents to the *Students in the Labour Market* survey carried out by NERU. The questions focused upon the nature of jobs undertaken by students and related employability issues. Possibilities for developing practical mechanisms for *connecting* student term-time working, employability and degree course programmes were also discussed, and the perspectives of interviewees elicited.

To provide a wider context for the investigation – and to identify relevant lessons and best practice where possible – a review was undertaken of work experience initiatives operated by other universities. This was done through an e-mail questionnaire. Information was supplied by 18 universities and further details on relevant projects were obtained, as appropriate. The experience gained from operating these initiatives informs discussion of possible courses of action (see final section).

Conceptualising term-time working

To understand the phenomenon of TTW, it is useful to introduce the distinction identified by Harvey *et al.* (1998: chap.1) in conceptualising the process. Such activity can be regarded in one of two main ways: *'Just a job'*, which is effectively a very limited conception of the process, however important in terms of supporting a student through a degree course; and *work experience*, with significantly wider implications for the student engaged in TTW.

It is clear from the NERU research that the ***'just a job' dimension*** is the perception of *most* students and that the key consideration, not surprisingly, is the wage received. NERU research shows that the detailed analysis of the returns from the NERU surveys of undergraduates has identified an association between TTW and lower grades. This showed, overall, that term-time working affects the average grades by between 1.4 and 7.1 percentage points, depending upon the School (Hunt and Walker 2001). This is also noticeable in relation to particular groups (i. e. lower income groups) and is a trend that is likely to increase with widening participation.

The ***work experience dimension***, in contrast, offers to students improved opportunities in the labour market as graduates via employability skills imparted through working. The key process here is *the identification of a learning method*, which develops (1) *key skills* (communication, application of number, IT, working with others; etc.) and (2) *personal attributes* (adaptability, flexibility, creativity). (It can also lead to an employment opportunity for students on graduation with specific employers - i.e. through graduate entry/management training schemes). Exploiting this dimension, however, requires a commitment from all the parties involved – universities, employers and students – based around the incorporation into the traditional curriculum of an integrated external learning process.

Survey findings

The survey findings show that student working is focused upon a range of (overwhelmingly service) sectors - from banking, through retail, to leisure industries – and that undergraduates can make up as much as three-quarters of a firm's workforce. However, TTW is overwhelmingly confined to what are classified as un- or semi-skilled jobs, e.g. check-outs, shelf-stacking, telesales, data entry, waitressing, etc. Most firms have a simple waged-based (and time-limited) relationship with student employees. Not surprisingly, given this context, the survey found that there is no real concern to develop skills; most positions involve only such on-the-job training as is needed to carry out the task(s). Moreover, as one employer commented; '*Students, on the whole, are not looking for career progression, just money to make ends meet*' (city centre bar/café).

Very few instances were found of firms taking on students for their degree course-based skills; the appeal of students to employers lies more with their flexible attitudes towards working conditions (including late shifts) and generic skills (numeracy, literacy, languages, ability to communicate etc). Employers acknowledged that, given their generic skills – including their ability to learn - students are very competitive in the labour market for lower skilled temporary jobs. They recognised that their skills are generally not being fully utilised.

The survey of other universities, however, identifies a movement towards developing the *work experience dimension* of TTW. Eighteen universities responded to

the e-mail questionnaire: twelve of which reported having introduced initiatives in this field (the others indicated that they operated no such schemes). The returns show that initiatives ranged from the traditional sandwich degree-based placement, organised at a faculty or school level, to accredited City & Guilds awards and student tutoring modules. There has been a clear trend within the HE sector to attempt to capitalise upon TTW in terms of its work experience dimension - generally through the introduction of some form of accreditation, which encourages a more reflective approach to TTW. Importantly, in recognition of the potential conflicts between work and academic performance, such initiatives usually incorporate time management modules to help students to structure study, work and leisure time.

Accreditation was found to be in use at two-thirds of the 18 respondent English universities – ranging from internal accreditation, mainly built around degree programmes, to external accreditation (e.g. the City & Guilds Personal Development Award). Degree-based accreditation was either organised as an extension of the traditional sandwich placement or provided via a credit-bearing module (for example, at Anglia Polytechnic University, where the 'Learning from Work Experience' module is part of students' academic programme).

Employers in the Northumbria University survey were asked for their response to the idea of employability initiatives in general and, more specifically, whether they were interested in becoming involved in the accreditation of *work experience*. Around one in four (mainly large employers) were very positive as regards involvement in accreditation schemes; fewer than one in five rejected the idea, although it should be remembered that the sample is small.

Interviewees were also asked about the value of having a specific contact at the University for purposes of identifying students seeking TTW who have specific (degree programme related) skills. More than a third said they would find this useful, as against one in four indicating they would not find this relevant in terms of their human resource strategies.

Case studies

Two short case studies, based on the interviews with employers, are presented to illustrate the kinds of arrangement which might be established to enhance employability benefits from TTW activity *and* which potentially benefit the employer and student in other respects.

1. *UK-based chain superstore*

At present this establishment does not offer student placements but does have a graduate recruitment programme and annually organises fairs etc. It facilitates TTW student progression (during undergraduate period and on graduation) and

has this embedded in its personnel system (which includes regular opening evenings for student employees). The HR Manager described the policy thus:

> *We recognise and value student progression as we've expanded massively over the last few years which has placed a strain on internal recourses. There's now an emphasis on getting graduates through and holding on to those people who have been loyal to the company whilst at university.*

There was little enthusiasm for the idea of co-operating over an employability certificate; *'this company is recognised as a leading retailer, with a robust training programme, both of which count for something when people move on'.* The manager was, however, keen that a direct University link – such as a named contact – be available to aid recruitment of students.

This case study revealed a company which seeks to operate independently (post-the recruitment phase) in relation to its student employees, but which is, arguably, helping to advance the work experience/student employability process through taking a longer-term view of TTW:

> *When we take on a student we don't just see someone who's here to earn money. We've invested so much money in recruiting and training them and as with all the other big retailers we need that person to deliver the role.*

2. UK-based high street retail store

This establishment has a long-standing link with the Newcastle Business School (Northumbria University), offering placement opportunities to its students, many of whom secure jobs with the company on graduation. They also operate a graduate recruitment programme and recognise TTW student progression; *'it is common for people to start working for us during term-time and end up after they graduate in a management-type position.'*

This represents an evolving policy at the company as it has come to acknowledge the recruitment opportunities associated with more students becoming involved in the labour market; *'we now target part-time students in our workforce and get them on a career path prior to their graduation.'*

The HR Manager was supportive of the idea of developing an employability certificate/ accreditation; indeed, the company has experience of operating this type of programme for staff. The interviewee also indicated the store's interest in a formal contact arrangement with the University. This arises out of the shift away from an internal promotion system in favour of one where university links are cultivated as a means of filling specific skill needs via TTW (for example, drawing students from courses which broadly cover the areas of administration, fashion and food).

The experience of this establishment suggests there may be an important opportunity for the University (universities) to develop student employability. It suggests a need for university proactivity in establishing a system which links to employers through TTW activity. These comments by the HR Manager illustrate a labour market need from the perspective of one firm:

> *I cover the whole of the North East in my position as resourcing organiser. I have been in the position for three months, and have as yet had no contact from any university. There does not seem to be the same types of academic networks for employers that existed in my last position in the North West. I need help in establishing these to develop the opportunities that exist.*

Issues arising

Based on the research undertaken for this study, we would recommend further investigations, including pilot studies, to investigate two key areas:

Accreditation of TTW – investigating the viability of different schemes

The appropriateness of differing accreditation systems needs to be investigated further.

§ *External schemes* – such as the **City & Guilds 'Personal Development Award'** which offers a flexible award. Such a scheme accommodates students undertaking voluntary work, working through recruitment agencies, and those undertaking student committee/club roles, etc. Such schemes also have the advantage (in terms of resources) of low academic staff involvement. However, experience of attempting to introduce such a scheme is mixed. One university reports that students were unwilling to engage in an accreditation route (presumably because it involved additional workload), and they have, instead, developed a non-accredited employer recognition award (Leeds Metropolitan University 2000).

§ *Internal schemes* – such as **work experience modules** could be made available to all students. These would need to be flexible and available at all levels of undergraduate study, with students having the option to take it at any level. With regard to schemes such as this the survey of universities suggests that the obstacle may be found in the attitudes of academic staff, who incur the costs of operating the process (in terms of their time) and are not necessarily convinced of the value of this activity. In the words used by one university respondent; '*a major stumbling block appears to be getting academic staff to agree that these modules are appropriate for their students to include in their main programme of study*'.

> ### *Identification of Internal contact*
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> The identification of a more accessible contact point for employers seeking to access more specialist (course-related) skills though TTW would be welcomed by many employers. Currently this is rather *ad hoc* and employers often find it difficult to access the 'black box' which is the University. Such contacts, though ostensibly for purposes of recruitment, would open up channels of communication between course leaders (for example) and key local employers, with a range of potential benefits. The precise mechanisms through which this would take place would need to be considered carefully, but the persons or office responsible for the liaison should be prepared to act proactively and approach employers with whom a worthwhile relationship might be developed with regards to TTW and related outcomes. The experience of one university responding to our survey suggests one danger which would need to be guarded against; '*on the whole, senior management does not engage with careers or employability as a central issue, leaving it up to Schools. Consequently there is a lot of talking about these issues but no concrete policy emerging*'.

References

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