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## Abstract

Recognising the growth in provision of vocational undergraduate programmes and the requirement for high quality work placement opportunities, managers from four residential outdoor education centres were interviewed to determine their perceptions on the components necessary to maximise student learning. The findings showed that the managers greatly valued the potential of a work placement; a need for clarity over the expectations for all stakeholders and that the placement remained authentic to modern centre life. Specifically it was felt that the students on placement needed to experience all aspects of work and not just the ‘glamorous’ bits.

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## 1. Introduction

A combination of a highly competitive employment market and the increased economic costs associated with higher education has reinforced the importance of providing students with a programme of study that will meet their needs. For many individuals, the decision to continue their educational journey is not one that is taken lightly and as such it is becoming increasingly important for the higher education institution (H.E.I) to be seen to be providing ‘value for money’ (Universities, 2015). Emphasising the continued expansion of higher education, due to an increased recognition of learning to enhance quality of life, the seminal Dearing (1997) confidently predicted students to be.

“...increasingly discriminating investors in higher education, looking for quality, convenience, and relevance to their needs at a cost they consider affordable and justified by the probable return on their investment of time and money...” (p.11).

Accordingly, the need for higher education to recognise and be responsive to the changing needs of their students and other stakeholders (such as employers) can be seen to be a priority. Furthermore the launch of the National Student Survey in 2005, allowing students to provide an assessment of quality (National Student Survey, 2015), has further reinforced the need for H.E.Is to provide programmes of study which meet the student need and better prepare graduates for the workplace.

Frequently touted as one of the most important things undergraduates can do alongside their programme of study, work-based learning is becoming commonplace and integrated across a range of subject areas and universities (Brown & Ahmed (2009); Driffield, Foster, & Higson (2011) ; Little & Harvey (2006)). Such provision requires a considered approach to planning, being attentive to the needs of the students as well as to those of the employers. In an attempt to address this, Foundation Degrees were introduced in February 2000 in order to help address a perceived shortfall in the labour market of employable graduates (Quality Assurance Agency, 2007). Similar to the Higher National Diploma (HND), but providing degree status, Foundation Degrees provide the undergraduate a balanced integration of academic knowledge and work-related experiences, which can be achieved in part through the completion of a work placement (Quality Assurance Agency, 2007).

This increasing expectation that the programme of study will meet both a student's academic and employability learning needs is exemplified in the following statement from an FdA Outdoor Education student as part of their response to the National Student Survey: *“I found the work placement is very important and was the best and most important part as it has given me new contacts and experience”* ( National Student Survey, 2015). As illustrated the work placement is often cited by students as the single most useful learning experience of their programme of study. During work placement, theory meets practice and students have the opportunity to apply what they have begun to investigate and explore in the lecture theatre to ‘real’ situations and with ‘real’ people. The value that a work placement offers students in the development of their own philosophy and career aspirations should also not be underestimated. A well-structured work placement can provide students a supportive environment in which to gain a deeper understanding of both their strengths and weaknesses and an opportunity to be realistic about their hopes and aspirations. Replicating these experiences in the classroom environment can be seen to be challenging in the least.

Although the potential of the work placement to afford the undergraduate with enhanced learning opportunities is strong across the literature (Hall, Higson, & Bullivant, 2009; Orrell, 2004) there can be seen to be a relative paucity of research undertaken which highlights the key components of placements deemed necessary to meet such goals. Any literature that is available principally takes the form of a guide (e.g. Murray, Wallace and Overton, 2003) and makes no discernible indication that employers were ever consulted in production. Consequently, the aim of this research is to address this potential deficiency by way of

considering the perspective of the employers. Analysis of data collected will then identify components of the undergraduate work placement deemed notable to maximise student learning.

## 2. Background

Higher education has a long association with the importance and value to be gained from students learning from experience and this can be seen to take many forms. Within science, experimentation is used within the laboratory and the fieldtrip has long been a feature within humanities. Few would argue that an essential ingredient of professional programmes such as nurse and teacher training is the supervised practice within schools and hospitals (Ulvik and Smith, 2011). As a whole when viewed from an experiential perspective this form of learning could be defined as the “...*process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience*” ( Kolb, 1984, p. 38). This knowledge created from experience can be seen to take many forms and Beaty (2008) notes that “...*many vocational courses plan for experiential learning to take place outside of the university as work-based learning*” (p.134).

Carver (1996) somewhat confidently suggests that “...*quite simply, experiential education is education (the leading of students through a process of learning) that makes conscious application of the students' experiences by integrating them into the curriculum*” (p.150). Perhaps this confidence is a little misplaced as Dewey, considered by many to be the father of experiential education suggested that “...*experience is a weasel word. Its slipperiness is evident in an inconsistency characteristic of many thinkers*” (1925, cited in Beard & Wilson, 2006, p. 16). It could be all too easy to claim that each individual has the same experience and extracts the same meaning and impact from the same phenomena. Thus, the ‘designing’ of experiences and in this thesis, the designing of the work placement experience becomes somewhat challenging. This is not a new problem.

Furthermore, with such a broad lexicon it can be perplexing to arrive at clarity over a definition of what work-based learning encompasses beyond the axiom that it is learning in the workplace as an alternative to the campus (Brennan, 2005). In all likelihood there is an element of misapplication of the range of expressions with an apparent free interchange of terminology such as Work-based learning, Work Experience, Work Placement, Work-related learning and Practicum evident throughout the range of available literature. Alongside an

increased use of terms such as employability and transferrable skills it is clear that the landscape of work-based learning is more populated and a glossary of terms is due.

Brennan (2005) recognises a distinction between work-based learning and work-related learning whereby the former is characterised by aspects of the curriculum being completed through various work-based activities and the latter by the development of more generic employability skills. Congruently, Moon (2004) considers work experience and work-based learning “... *as the poles of a continuum of work-related learning*” (p.163). The proposition is that work experience involves activities of a more generic nature, not necessarily specific to the learners’ discipline whereas work-based learning has a focus on the curriculum (Portwood and Costley are cited in Moon, 2004). Ball and Manwaring (2010) profess that work-based learning provides “...*an authentic context for learning [and] can enrich student learning...*” (p.3). They go on to stress that main learning environment for the student is the workplace and that the “...*immediacy of the work context to provide practice and to encourage reflection on real issues [leads] to meaningful applicable learning*” (p.3).

Wareham (No date) employs the term ‘workplace learning’ and offers a spectrum between, on the one side, workplace-focused, where learning needs are identified in the place; through to University-focused, where learning takes place solely within the university and the workplace is recognised through simulation and case study. It is evident that the use of the workplace can vary from one institution to another depending upon how integral any placement is, amongst others, in meeting learning outcomes, programme aims and assessment process. It is therefore important to avoid thinking that there is only one ideal form of work experience because different forms offer different benefits (Blackwell, Bowes, Harvey, Hesketh, & Knight, 2001). A recent addition to work-based learning portfolio is the use of the RWE or Realistic Working Environment with many institutions running their own business in which the students work in order to provide a realistic taste of the work place. Sedgmore (2013) claims that there are insufficient high quality employer placements and instead suggests colleges should provide realistic working environments (RWEs) such as training restaurants, travel agencies and hairdressing salons. An example of such an endeavour within the field of outdoor education can be seen to be Frontier Education, “...*a project that enables students to work with real clients in a controlled environment where experimentation and the introduction of new ideas are welcomed*” ( Wilson, 2006, p.131). Mackinnon (2013) concedes that currently there is the need for such realistic working environments, as “...*far*

*too much work experience is low quality*” (p.1). He goes on to advise that institutions “...*should step up to the challenge to get a high quality placement for every vocational student*” (p.1).

Additionally within this lexis, experience which is gained on placements, away from the originating institution can be found. The generic nature of placement allows partner organisations to tailor the purpose to suit a particular set of learning outcomes and purposes. For example, a placement at one institution may form an integral part of academic curriculum affording the opportunity for practice-based learning to occur, whereas at another, its focus may be on the development of employability skills. This simple variation, alongside those highlighted above makes it difficult to provide an accurate definition acceptable to all (Q.A.A, 2007). Nevertheless, in principal placements can be seen to be a branch of a larger work-based learning tree, in which students are given experience within a workplace over a specified period of time. These placements can offer a supervised and meaningful role to students within a host organisation (Beaty, 2008) and away from the institution to which the student is enrolled (Q.A.A, 2007).

As Dewey (1938) points out, without consideration to the structure and content, some placements may provide “...*experiences that are worthwhile educationally...*” (p.33), while others do not.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Paradigm assumptions

My interpretative research is based on the constructivist paradigm. It is my belief that a person has their own individual perception of reality and these multiple truths and realities each have value to be comprehended during future discussion. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) suggest that this can be considered relativist ontology and that knowledge and understanding is gained through interactions with others where the knowledge produced is reflective of individual realities. Epistemologically the research was then driven by a subjectivist enquiry and centred on a co-creation of knowledge from the differing perspectives and experiences offered by the participants and accordingly utilised an interpretive methodology and subsequent research design with the ultimate aim of “...*generating one or a few*

*constructions on which there is a substantial consensus”* ( Guba, 1990, p27 cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.105).

It was my intention to undertake inductive research and as Finlay (2008) proposes the aim was to allow the phenomenon to present itself to me instead of me imposing preconceived ideas on it. This interpretive research used a variety of different methods to collect and analyse individual perceptions and views of the participants involved in the study. The process begins with an acknowledgement of my own thoughts and ideas and an awareness of the danger of placing my own interpretations on to the participants. As such these needed to be ‘bracketed’ (Flood, 2010) and my previous assumptions and understandings suspended (Finlay, 2008) thus allowing the participants to offer their own subjective perspective of the phenomenon. The data collection and subsequent analysis needed to reflect the participant's voice and be interpreted with an awareness of the lens I am looking through. If this failed to occur then there was a danger of me seeing what I want to see and pushing the findings where I want it to go. One simple example here is that I am aware that I am looking through the eyes of a higher education lecturer and am aware of all the timetabling constraints and pressures that will impact upon any decision making in regard to the structure of a placement.

An example of this can be considered when looking at the best time of year for the placement to occur. Higgins and Nicol (2002) point out sufficient foundations need to be in place as “...*the learner may wish to modify their personal experiences with reference to existing theoretical constructs*” (p.41). To be able to undertake this reconstruction to an extent dictates the timing of the placement within the curriculum delivery and if too soon, the student risks having limited foundational theory with which to begin gaining these fresh understandings. Despite this predetermination, it is important to try to remain neutral to the subject and to approach the process in an open-minded manner, acknowledging, but not acting on these personal perspectives.

### 3.2. Context and sample

The initial selection of organisations was grounded in a review of the placements previously undertaken by Level 4 students studying a foundation degree in an outdoor related subject in NW England over the 3 years beginning 2012–2013. This desk top survey was able to establish the range, type and location of placements undertaken by over 60 students. It was found that the range of placements undertaken by students was wide reaching; however, a

significant number of students secured a placement with an organisation that could be broadly defined as a residential outdoor education centre. Somewhat surprisingly the number of outdoor education centres where a placement was undertaken within Cumbria, and particularly within the boundaries of the Lake District National Park was perhaps lower than could have been expected, particularly considering the number of opportunities available and their close proximity to the students. This posed a question as to why, which was later revealed within the findings and discussions.

The research accordingly moved towards ascertaining those organisations that would fit these characteristics; namely residential outdoor education centres within Cumbria. Homogeneous sampling (Patton, 2001) was undertaken through use of the Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres (AHOEC) publically accessible website. This sampling strategy reflected the fact that the participants needed to be analogous. In this instance the similarity referred to outdoor education centres within Cumbria, who recruited graduates and individuals within that organisation that were responsible for making the decision to recruit.

The examination of the AHOEC database identified 25 full individual members of which 11 were based within Cumbria. To be a full member you need to be employed in a strategic leadership and management role and be committed to providing High Quality Outdoor Education (AHOEC, 2015). 11 centres were also identified that again were based in Cumbria. A further 5 centres although not listed appeared to be represented by individual Full Members. Where an organisation was seen to be listed as a centre and had individuals with full memberships only the individuals were used in the initial data collection. Where an organisation was represented by more than one individual with Full Membership all individuals were contacted and were asked if they would like to be part of a group interview / focus group after the completion of an introductory survey.

Accordingly, 25 individual members were contacted through email and invited to complete an Introductory Survey (via Bristol Online Survey) to further establish their compatibility and their willingness to take part in a research interview. 5 organisations went on to complete the survey and 4 subsequently consented to and were later interviewed.

### 3.3. Interviews



Following the survey in order to provide clarity and elaboration (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) a series of five exploratory (Oppenheim, 1992) interviews were conducted. Interviews, would allow me to gain a detail and insight (Denscombe, 2010) that would enhance the findings of the survey. Oppenheim (1992) suggests that an exploratory interview is heuristic affording the researcher the opportunity to collect ideas and if undertaken well be dominated by the interviewees voice.

“The job of the depth interviewer is thus not that of data collection but ideas collection. The primary objective is to maintain spontaneity; the ideal free-style interview would consist of a continuous monologue by the respondent on the topic of the research, punctuated now and again by an ‘uhuh, uhuh’ from the interviewer!” (Oppenheim, 1992, p67)

It was hoped that those willing to be interviewed would not be limited to those who have already received students on placement but include those who have either been approached previously and declined, or that have yet to seriously consider it. It was felt that this may help to provide some acknowledgement of my own voice and biases (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) and such help to enrich the research.

#### 3.4. Ethical considerations

All participants in the data collection were required to provide written informed consent outlining their acceptance to participate and confirming their understanding of the purpose of the study. It was intended that all the interviews be undertaken at the participants’ place of work. However, as highlighted by Marshall and Rossman (2011) due to current technology it was possible to undertake a series of online ‘virtual’ interviews to more easily incorporate those participants who are geographically distant. In reality, all interviews occurred, face to face in the participant's workplace.

#### 3.5. Pilot interview

As preparation for the data collection phase a pilot interview was conducted. This contributed in the identification and removal of any foreseen or unforeseen issues prior to carrying out the actual research (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This pilot also helped gain an indication of time constraints and enabled refinements and modifications to the process to be implemented. One thing that was considered during this pilot was the method of recording the interview

and how this may impact upon the interviewee. Silverman (2013) asserts that interviews must be recorded, but Denscombe (2010) suggests that one disadvantage of recording an interview is the inhibitions that it may lead to. After the pilot stage I believed that this impact was negligible given the nature of the subject material being discussed. With modern technologies recording of the interview can be deemed to be a critical way of maintaining the validity (Denscombe, 2010) of the interview as it reduces inaccuracies in any ensuing transcription which was to be undertaken.

A series of open questions were developed to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the participants' views (Silverman, 2013). These questions allowed the participant to reflect and incorporate personal experiences. In line with the underpinning research paradigm a constant comparative method was adopted. Whereby the findings of each interview then informed subsequent interviews and the questions asked in allowed points of interest to be further explored (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). The interviews commenced, after assurances over anonymity and confidentiality, with an introductory question to initiate discussion (i.e. Can you please introduce yourself and the organisation that you will be representing today?). This approach was adopted after advice received during the pilot interview suggested that a rapport building 'easy' question might help to relax both parties. The main body of the interview then followed as a series of key open questions initially broad in nature and then followed by probes to seek clarity and encourage elaboration through the use of specific examples from their own experiences. Each interview lasted between 50 – 65 min.

### 3.6. Data analysis

The intention of the analysis of the interviews was to identify a series of categories which explained the factors that residential outdoor education centres considered to be significant in work placement provision. The interviews were transcribed and analysed applying a series of codes (words or short phrases) to capture the salient attributes of the data (Saldana, 2012). Following this inductive approach, the identification of any meaningful segments the information was reconstructed into common topics and then into more manageable and meaningful sub-categories and categories or themes. This approach allowed for repetitive patterns to be identified and subsequently inductive reasoning to be offered. When considering the data as suggested by Denscombe (2010) interpretative research should provide an un-edited detailed description which doesn't impose the researchers own views

and predispositions. Denscombe (2010) goes on to suggest that contradictions should be expected and that these should be embraced within the analysis. It was to be hoped that through this reduction (Thorne, 2000) a thorough description of the nature of an outdoor education work placement at an outdoor education centre and some specifics of its essential structures would result.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

Based on the interview transcripts the elements outlined below have been deemed important by the employers for an outdoor education work placement. In describing the elements, the employers' responses have, where permitted, been cited at length in order to elicit the finer distinctions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012) and attempt to reduce the exclusion of other possible interpretations that may have been meant or could be gained by another analyst. Where possible the use of the quotations has also helped clarify the reasons behind the employers' point of view.

Over 50 raw data codes emerged from the initial interpretation of the data. Conceptualisation of these codes revealed 13 sub-categories and five categories that collectively represented the elements perceived by outdoor educators to be central in a meaningful and successful outdoor education work placement. These were stakeholder expectations, logistical concerns, content, supervision and pre-placement procedure. A breakdown of the major categories as well as the relationship amongst these categories can be seen in Fig. 1.

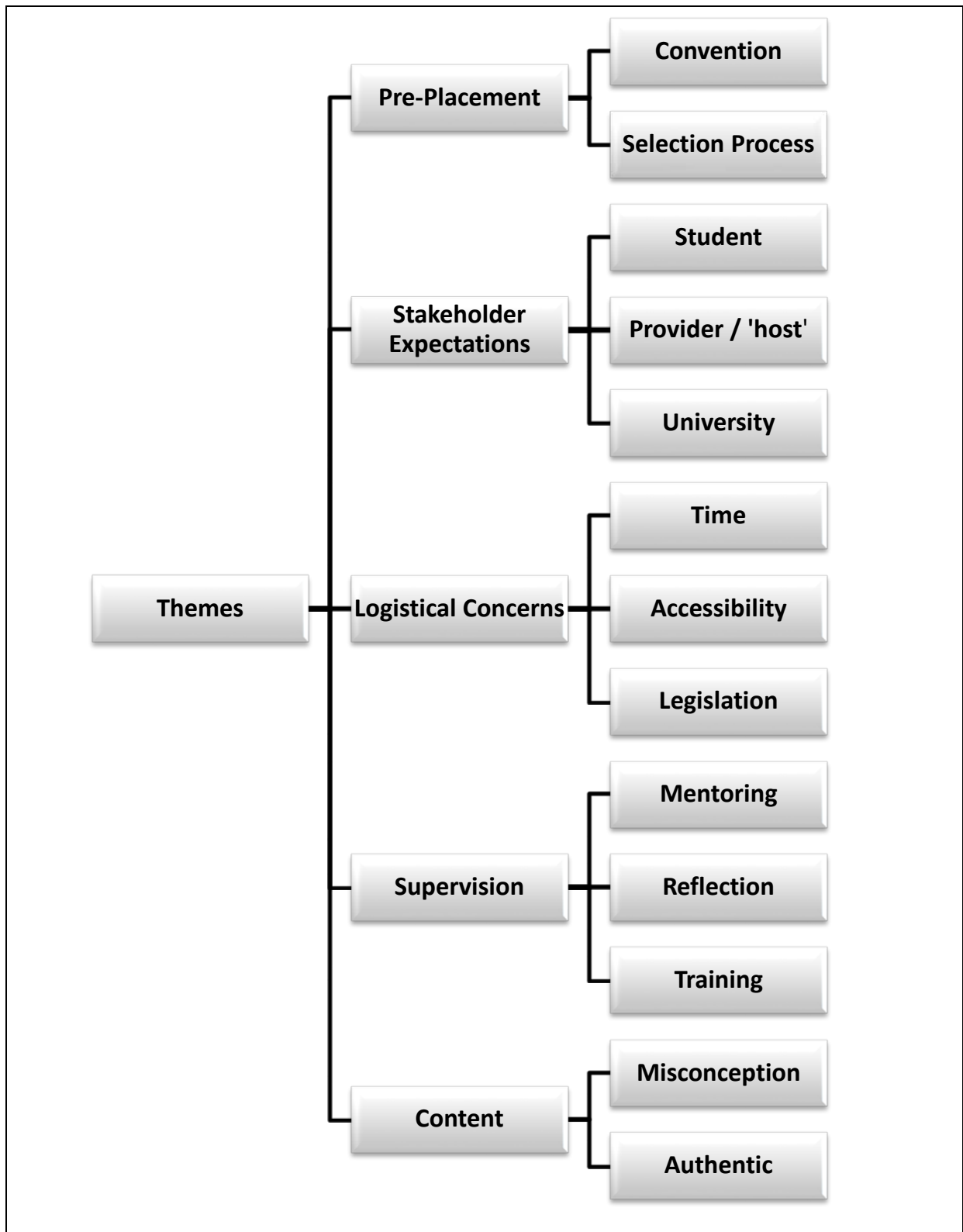


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of outdoor education centre work placement providers' perceptions of the elements to be considered significant in higher education work placement design and provision

#### 4.1. Stakeholder expectations

In a learning context, namely the workplace, that is perhaps less familiar to students more used to the structured classroom environment provided through the traditional education system in the UK, the importance of having a clear understanding of the structure and expectations in order to gain the most from the experience was presented by the managers. As manager 2 explained, 'it is good to know from both sides what our starting parameters are and where we are trying to build it to.'

Emphasising the need for clarity over expectations amongst all three stakeholders, the connection between expectation and the pre-placement process and the perceived benefits of placement in order to avoid providing a poor quality placement experience (Mackinnon, 2013; Sedgmore, 2013), the following manager explained the importance of the student being fully aware of the potential value of the placement and therefore the need to fully embrace the experience (Carver, 1996):

...I mean presumably they are interested in the first place. I think there's a ...if people are tuned into what they want to get out of it and what they have got to get out of it then I think it gives them far more impetus to go and extract that information.... I think the whole thing is potentially a positive experience but I think is about being clear about what the goal is. (1)

Further illustrating the requirement that the student is made fully aware of what to expect and what is to be expected from a forthcoming placement, the following manager highlighted that:

'If it's not in their mind that's its actually quite hard work and our expectation is pretty high of actually what we are looking for; they are turning up thinking that they're going to be able to go out sailing or do a bit of rock climbing here, that would be a complete mismatch' (2).

Supportive of the work of Michel et al. (2009) the significance of having students on placement who are fully prepared and as such were 'proactive', 'keen' and not 'wallflowers' was deemed to be an essential element of a successful placement. The centre managers all made reference to how 'putting a lot of effort in' at the start of their own career ( Bates, Bell, Patrick, & Crebert, 2004), becoming 'active learners' (Middleton, 2013) had a notable benefit to their own personal and professional development and all the managers expressed the

importance and desire to put effort into upcoming outdoor educators. As the following manager explained:

... It's not just a "yeah come along and have a look and see what you think"...the older they are the more responsible they are for their own learning. So a university student is very much, if they don't want to get anything out of it, fine, but if they are a wallflower, I don't want them; if they are proactive then you're useful (1).

A professional attitude also emerged as a significant theme. This centred around the desire from the 'hosts' that the student is fully aware and willing to take ownership and of their own learning in this context (Michel et al., 2009). This significance of this was expressed by the following manager, 'its work. It's about being in a professional context'(1). An essential aspect of this need for a professional approach stemmed from the importance of not '...compromising our business goals...' and that the student was made aware that '...this is a nice to have [referring to a placement] rather than an essential'. Emphasising that placements were not business critical several managers spoke about 'staffing pressures' and their desire that the student didn't just act as a 'leech', but in fact 'contributed something' to the centre. Making the connection to the pre-placement preparation the following manager suggested that, 'I don't think it is actually too much to ask that they meet certain criteria which are about the way they interact with people' (1). Further illustrating the frustrations experienced by some of the centre managers in regard to the lack of understanding from students over a professional attitude, one manager highlighted an example of a student starting a letter of application, 'Yo'. This may suggest a fundamental need to fully prepare the students prior to commencing the placement by integrating a comprehensive series of generic workplace skills into the undergraduate curriculum ( Bates et al., 2004).

The significance of this formal process and clarity from the university also emerged as a central theme and can be seen to support the existing research (e.g. Brennan, 2005; Orrell, 2004; Murray et al., 2003). Ensuring that the 'host' organisation is fully aware of the university requirements in terms of assessment and mentoring for instance emerged from the interviews. As one manager explained, a close working association should exist; 'It just means that if you are going to have a proper relationship with a university, it should be a partnership to develop people...' (3); and another manager suggested that in order to remove any ambiguity:

...any training is useful to have somebody clarify it. "...Right so, Mark [referring to the researcher] is in today and he is going to do an hour with us about the programme, so we understand it, about what their needs are, why they are coming, what you want out of it, this is how to look after them"; everyone goes, winner! (1)

This need for clarity was emphasised still further when considering the fundamentals of work-based learning terminology with one manager persistently using the term 'trainee' and another the term 'apprentice'. To this end, the need for the 'host' organisation to be adopting the same glossary of terms (Alaska Dept. of Education and Early Development, 2015) becomes significant in order to be sure that each stakeholder is speaking the same language.

To summarize it became apparent that the managers were conveying that how a lack of comprehensive pre-placement preparation for the student might have repercussions in terms of the student matching expectations to reality. To further illustrate, the centre managers felt it was imperative for the student to experience a fully rounded understanding of exactly what centre life was like and that it was important for them to arrive knowing what it was that they were about to undertake. In this study, these experiences were largely perceived as needing to be varied and representative of challenges and economic pressures of contemporary centre life. Consistent with Beaty (2008) who stressed the importance of clearly articulating and agreeing expectations between the placement provider, students and the university, the importance of clarity over expectations from all stakeholders from the outset was considered as a key determinant in providing a fruitful placement. Furthermore, in congruence with Dyson, McCluskey, and Plunkett (2015) it was emphasised that any lack of clarity would lead to these expectations not being met leading in turn to dissatisfaction from all stakeholders.

#### 4.2. Pre-placement process

Consistent with Murray et al. (2003) recommendations that carefully prepared students are more likely to get more from the placement another key aspect of this research was the methods utilised to ensure this. For the managers it was clear that they were seeking students who were mature, self-starters, with a clear set of shared expectations and who possessed a professional attitude. Indeed, centre work was seen as a people business and having the right people (i.e. motivated) was seen as fundamental in fostering a positive placement experience.

Supporting Blackwell et al. (2001) assertion that an aspect of good practice can be seen to be the need to establish a purposefulness to the placement, the need to have some form of

system in place whereby the student and the 'host' organisation were able to meet (to amongst other things, clarify expectations and establish the fundamental structure of the placement) was discussed. Although these factors were considered important, identifying the methods of achieving this appeared largely contingent on the philosophy and time available to the individual centre. Perhaps, given the nature of the outdoor sector the convention of this selection process was seen by some to be 'very organic, very relaxed'. To illustrate the nature of this process, one manager suggested that in order to illicit the suitability of the placement for the student and correspondingly the suitability of the student for the placement then they would '...go boating or go climbing and just have a nice day out, peer to peer and from that they are assessing us and we are assessing them' (4). In congruence another manager stated:

I like having the contact point with the student where they come in prior to the placement. I think in fairness to them I wouldn't describe it as an interview, because I think that puts them into a feeling if it's super serious here! (2)

A central element of this approach to the selection process was the desire for the centre manager to meet the student who is 'motivated', 'passionate' and career driven. As one manager explained, 'I would be interested in somebody who wanted to help, rather than felt like they had to help' and went on to say 'if they weren't keen, then being that motivator for them is not the ideal' (4). Following a similar line of thought, Driffield et al. (2011) found that when placements were optional it was the higher quality student who saw the value and consequently seized the opportunity. This desire to be able to appraise a student and for the student to fully comprehend the nature of the 'host' prior to arrival was further emphasised by the following centre manager, 'I will always interview people, it doesn't matter if they're year 10 s or whether they are university students. I'll want to meet them and I'll want them to see the place' (1). As one manager pointed out, 'it is about the appropriate placement' (4), about matching aspirations, motivations and skill levels between student and placement. This could indicate that the placement is a customized product and one that should be driven by the needs of the student and not through the academic curriculum ( Boud & Solomon, 2003).

Consistently the centres felt it important to meet the student prior to the placement, but were varied in their approach to the location, level of formality and time devoted to the interview process. Highlighting the interaction between a selection process and the placement, it was evident that meeting the student in any capacity prior to the commencement of the placement was an imperative to sow the seeds of a successful placement. Indeed, it was considered as



important to allow the student an opportunity to see what they were letting themselves in for and to allow them a chance to say no thank you.

In terms of the university matching students and pre-selecting placements for the students the feelings were varied. When considering how to secure a placement one manager welcomed the initiative of self-starters, 'if you have got somebody who actually gets of their bum and then organises it themselves, it says something a bit more about them' (1). Although several managers stressed that there were certainly advantages to be had in students being 'placed' as 'it means that there is a filter in place' and that this process would suggest a more 'formal process' that would be 'easier to manage' as the centres would know the specifics of who, why and when. However, given the nature of the work that is undertaken at outdoor centres the managers discussed the right to make the final decision over whether or not a student would secure the placement, 'Now I am quite prepared to say no. Now having met you I don't think you will be a good fit for here' (1). This view was reinforced by the criticality of the client's experience not being compromised by having a student on placement with manager one going on to state:

'It also can't have a detrimental effect on the client experience because they are our life blood. If they don't come back we go out of business and nobody is going to have any placement' (1).

#### 4.3. Content

During the interviews one of the managers explained they want to provide an authentic experience (Higgins & Nicol, 2002), and when referring to the changing nature of the economic climate and associated pressures on staffing highlighted the reality to which the students needed to be exposed. As one manager commented 'that is the reality of outdoor education; you've got to muck in' (3). Another provided a modicum of caution and reminded us that the experience should be meaningful to the student (Beaty, 2008), '...now I am not just going to get them to fold leaflets and stuff like that, but when a booking comes in, how do we evolve it, how do we go along a cater for all the educational links...' (4). As encapsulated by the following manager, clearing up misunderstandings combined with the desire to provide a realistic and meaningful experience (Beard, 2005) were the key contents to a successful placement:

If they want to go into this then they need to see what the reality is. But I also think that there is the wider picture. Their focus is always on the outdoor activities and the teaching and actually, the thing I got from being in a centre was about being under the skin of the centre. And that's about being there in the evening, it's about kitchens, it's about doing a bit of cleaning, it's everything. It is not just the glory bit of taking a group kayaking and going right which skill acquisition bit am I actually applying here (1).

Consistent with Lave and Wenger (1991) contention that learning is situated within the context in which applied, another central feature of this exploration was the importance placed on ensuring that the student experiences all aspects of centre work and not just those aspects perceived to be the more 'glamorous'. For the managers in this study, providing an effective work placement extended well beyond the mere provision of venue, activity and appropriate supervision. Although these factors were important, establishing the optimum placement experience appears to require that students experience all aspects of the role and for this to be made indubitably clear from the outset. For example, managers discussed how they looked to clear up the various misconceptions this type of work, through providing a placement representative of the realities and rigours of residential outdoor centre life (Guile & Griffiths, 2001). Furthermore, a well-designed, structured and agreed placement experience can allow for the student to be given responsibility and take ownership of their own learning (Sibthorp, Paisley, Gookin, & Furman, 2008) and supported by effective reflective mentoring (Dyson et al., 2015), for them to then test some new or rearrange some previously accepted filters through which they view their experiences (Allison and Pomeroy, 2000). Indeed, these changes in ontology and an increase in ability to know oneself are foremost to the development of deep and meaningful learning (Beard and Wilson, 2006) and as such require vigilant consideration in placement design and student support.

#### 4.4. Supervision

Within this theme the most prominent feature to emerge centred on the need to provide training to both the students in terms of their ability to reflect and the 'host' organisation in terms of their ability to mentor. To illustrate this one manager placed value in the need for training by stating:

When I supervised teacher training students there was a mentor training day...I took a lot of value from that because it was very clear about what the expectations are and I think it is easy to make assumptions that you know how to mentor somebody or look after somebody (1).

This comment was endorsed by manager 2, who reaffirmed the concern raised by Ord and Leather (2011) that models risk oversimplifying experiential learning, which in turn may lead to a misunderstanding and misuse of the approach, by proposing:

The mentors need to understand what reflective practice is, they need to know how to help people actually do that; and what you actually want is people to be able to self-reflect without the help. You get to a point where people are actually able to process it themselves (2).

Whilst the 'expectation to reflect on things' was valued, one manager advised caution and explained that there was 'a lot of assumption about reflective practice' (1) and that it is important that students were 'taught how to reflect' in order to gain from the experience. Expanding reflection, the following manager highlighted the problematic nature of the process of transfer of learning from one context to another (Dixon & Brown, 2012), 'How do you make that transfer of what this theoretical stuff fits into that and what's the effect of it?' (2). It has been argued that transfer of learning is highly problematic (Brown (2010); Wolfe & Samdahl (2005)) and that the learning experiences presented should be representative of the competencies that students currently have and want to develop in their life beyond the work placement (Anderson, Greeno, Reder, & Simon, 2000). This once again highlights the necessity to make the experience meaningful and authentic and the dangerous assumption that the 'host' organisations are fully acquainted with the complexities of such learning processes. An appropriate choice of mentor is therefore extremely important (Gray, Hodgson, & Heaney, 2011). A mentor who is skilled enough to know when to offer guidance or at times when to step aside will develop a productive relationship and can provide the difference between an average and fruitful placement experience (Gong, Chen, & Lee, 2011).

Given the potential importance of the work placement in student development, those who are involved at the placement consequently need to be trained and supported in ways which enable them to identify and assemble learning activities which the placement can provide. For example, providing time set aside during the day in which the mentor and mentee are able to reflect (Moon, 2004) will allow meaningful reflection to occur (Ringer, 2004). Left to chance, it is to the detriment of the student who may miss out on opportunities that have been made available to others. Learning opportunities afforded the students shouldn't be just fortuitous and instead the placement provider should be offering more than just a series of experiences, expecting the student to make the connections and attempting to transfer any learning in isolation (Eraut, 2004). We need to develop practice which will help to provide

more than just a placement, giving the students real opportunities for personal and social development, as well as improved chances for connecting what they need and what they want with what they do (Ringer, 2004).

Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), utilising the term 'scaffolding', and drawing on the work of eminent psychologist Lev Vygotsky, postulate learning as a situation in which there is a gradual withdrawal of support from the tutor / instructor and an associated release of responsibility as the learner is able to take more ownership of their own learning. This constructivist approach to learning has profound implications for teaching and learning in general and in particular learning within the work place. It indicates that in order for learning to occur the individual learners must be able to individually discover and transform wide-ranging information (Slavin, 2014). It was evident that although some of the managers felt comfortable in themselves and their colleagues in providing such appropriate support, others highlighted that it is perhaps too often assumed that people know how to mentor or effectively supervise students on placement. This finding is supported by Ulvik and Smith (2011) who expressed concern over the lack of education and randomness of mentor selection.

For the managers, although considered important, establishing the optimal environment for mentoring and reflection appeared largely contingent on the culture or atmosphere that exists in the centre. Indeed, although effective mentoring and reflection was seen as instrumental in cultivating a successful placement experience, how, when and the level of formality of this process was wide-ranging. For example, the managers discussed the desire of having the same mentor throughout to build this trust, but that this may not always be possible due to the transient nature of staff on short contracts. It was therefore deemed important that to have all the team on board and with sufficient skills to be able to undertake this role (Ulvick et al., 2011), sufficient lead in time to prepare fully for the placement students arrival was necessary.

#### 4.5. Logistical concerns

A question arising from the initial desk survey was to why so few students are able to secure placements at outdoor centres based within the boundaries of a local national park. Without a complete understanding of the economies of scale it is perhaps not unrealistic to assume that a 'residential' outdoor education centre would be able to offer accommodation for the student on placement. In fact, this is not always this case and as one manager stated:

Sometimes people think or naively assume that we can give people accommodation ..... we can't because, basically everything is maxed.....we don't do accommodation. We can negotiate. If they are coming along way, we may let them have a tent on the lawn, but this depends on the groups as some are against that (3).

Upon first look the centre itself may be quite close, 'as the crow flies' but with the nature of the geography of the Lake District, be in fact a couple of valley's away and have limited or no links through public transport. This can prove awkward at best and potentially unrealistic from the perspective of the student, in terms of economics and time and from the providers' perspective in terms of the challenge and additional effort that this presents. As the following manager explained:

And the other one is getting here. I would love to go there, brilliant, ah how do I get there? I can't get there, can you pick me up at the end of the road, can I have a lift, can I...? And we can help, but it's beyond our.....you know. (3).

The implication of the geographical location of the centre and in some instances the economic pressure and need to utilise all the available beds manifested itself in the fact that the students needed to be fully cognisant of the implications of travel and be willing, motivated and able to make potentially extended journeys at both ends of a long day. In itself this was seen to be a contributing factor as to the need to carefully manage any extended placement to avoid students becoming overly tired and 'burned out'.

These considerations may inadvertently provide the answer as to why students choose to source a placement close to their parental home. Even though the choice of potential providers is likely less the actual chance of them being able to get there is greatly enhanced when you are able to get a lift from mum or dad. This furthermore indicates the importance of clarity of expectations on all sides from the outset and illustrates how motivation and determination on the part of the student is significant factor in the success or otherwise of the placement.

Consistent with the tenets of Lortie that practical knowledge "... [craft] is work in which experience improves performance – the job cannot be learned in weeks or even months" (1975, cited in Brown & McIntyre, 1993, p. 18), the managers all felt that the placement duration was a significant consideration in the planning process. However, an extended placement was not judged inevitably beneficial to the student.

The duration of the placement was considered to have an influence which could either be positive (e.g. enough time to embed and be of value) or negative (e.g. 'burnt out'). As one manager commented, the duration of placement is not an easy one to stipulate,

'But, actually....it's too short [referring to a one week placement] and it's also it's such a limited experience in terms of what you see, so it needs to be.... I don't know what the minimum length is, but it needs to be of value, so...well realistically you are probably looking at three weeks' (1).

Emphasising the need for value to both the 'host' and the student it was seen important that the placement offered enough time for the student to embed and to be able to do more than just receive, but in fact to give something back (Murray et al., 2003). As one manager explained,

There's a lot of opportunity for them to have experiences and take knowledge, but actually what I want is.... it would be nice if they actually contributed something. So, they can contribute by helping, but realistically that takes time to embed, to learn what they've got to do, so you can't have a week placement.... because you spend the first week just seeing how it works (4).

It was clear that to the manager's long journey times to work or living on site were factors that should be considered with regard to placement duration as they were perceived to have an impact on the success of the placement. Extended placements were deemed to have a potential negative impact, not only on the student in terms of 'tiredness', but on the staff workload 'when you are at capacity' and potentially on the 'client experience'. As the following manager explained:

I think when it gets to the end of the six weeks, you know in that last week folks are tired, so you are having to encourage them through to the finish line. They are usually tired because they have... put a lot into it....and they are based here on site, so that they are with people in the evening, so I think they usually find they are ready for a rest at the end of it...(2).

Echoing the observations of Biggs and Tang (2011) and the consequence of not leaving the potential for high quality, meaningful learning to chance, was the perceived value and meaning that the student may take from the placement experience at certain times of year. Whilst it was felt appropriate that the students got a realistic experience of the centre it was

felt that some times of year were of less value than others due to the nature of the work being undertaken. As one manager commented; 'Programmes dwindle at that stage [winter]. Lots on in terms of maintenance, but it would feel more like a factory floor cleaning work experience' (2). The same manager also stated that sometimes the programme was so busy that the staff were 'pretty exhausted' and that it would be difficult 'to get the support level right for the student'.

One factor that the managers discussed in terms logistics related to health and safety and to the perception that if you are not qualified then you add to the ratio. Although acknowledged that 'a student on placement, adds to the ratio' it was felt that there were mechanisms to countenance this whereby as one manager stated you 'can empower them with the responsibility of being an assistant instructor' (4) and other explained that 'the trainee is seen as an extra observer or help to that session depending on experience and this doesn't impact on ratios' (3). Although staff to student ratio has a significant impact on the delivery of outdoor activities, it is perhaps surprising that the managers all appeared optimistic that this is something that is manageable on students on placement. Nevertheless, of the variety of approaches discussed to address this issue, one fundamental assumption remained; that the students on placement would have a level of ability suitable to perhaps act as an assistant. This assumption raises some interesting points in relation to the entry requirements, beyond the academic, to access the programme; the time the placements occur within the programme and the practical skill developing content of the programme. Additionally, this further exemplifies the criticality of matching the correct student to the correct placement and that some form of selection process at either university or through pre-placement interview is warranted.

Relating back to the importance of expectations and time, the potential obstacle of ratios could be seen to be accommodated by matching aspirations, motivations and skill levels between the student and the 'host' and their client groups. As previously illustrated, one manager said 'it's about appropriate placement'.

## 5. Conclusions

Throughout this research it became evident that determining the employers' perspective on maximising student learning on an outdoor education work placement is a complex process with many commonalties which paradoxically contained many differences and variations. Drawing upon the expert knowledge, and through the scrutinising and reduction of this,

several themes were presented. These themes comprise some significant components to maximise the student experience on an outdoor education work placement:

- Ensuring clarity of expectation for the various stakeholders
- A comprehensive pre-placement process
- An authentic content
- Effective and appropriate supervision
- Acknowledgement to logistical concerns

The findings support several expectations derived through the literature review. For example, many of the components that emerged in this research mirror those presented by Ball and Manwaring (2010), Beck and Kosnik (2002), Blackwell et al. (2001) and Murray et al. (2003) as being best practice in work placements. For example, ensuring that a formal partnership in which all stakeholders are fully conversant with the expectations of one another is in place. This congruence with wider literature and guidelines outside outdoor education highlights the commonalities that exist between all sectors of the economy, from teaching and nursing, through to hospitality and leisure. Despite this similarity with other research, this study provides a distinctive insight into understanding placement best practice, not only in outdoor education but across a range of employment sectors in general. Specifically, the findings have offered an account unique to the residential outdoor education centre of the factors deemed to be critical in providing a mutually beneficial work placement.

One of the first observations that can be drawn is that not unsurprisingly perhaps, given that they had agreed to be involved in the process, there was general agreement over the value of and need to provide the work placement. All respondents were keen to 'return the favour' offered to them at the outset of their careers and although recognising that the placement was not business critical indicated that the placement experience was analogous in significance to the academic pathway. This raises the importance of the role that both the University (as a provider of students) and the student themselves have in maintaining this good will and for the process to be treated with due regard to its status as a recognised and valued learning process.

Perhaps, as expected from the discussions undertaken in the literature review, gaining some clarity over terminology can be considered as a fundamental principle upon which the



placement process can then be developed. Any ambiguity at this early stage will in all certainty lead to dissatisfaction with expectations not being met. Additionally, it is important to not assume that the placement 'host' knows what to do. Provision of training within the workplace which focuses on terminology, supervision, mentoring and structuring of the placement activities, could be added to the placement process. Such training can be seen to be vital, given the transient nature of 'freelance' staff employed on short contracts. For example, if a 'freelancer' is expected to supervise and mentor, recognising and embracing the philosophy of their employer is central to providing the student on placement with a valued learning experience (Gong et al., 2011). The ability and opportunity of the senior centre staff to then take such training 'in house', operated as continued professional development and for the staff to incorporate into their future professional practice could also be investigated.

Economic pressures, time of year, travel times, securing accommodation and safety ratios all have the potential to be barriers to the student securing a work placement. As highlighted within this project, student motivation, professionalism and awareness of the challenges to be faced, alongside the 'hosts' positive attitude and willingness to 'find a way' are crucial factors in the continued development of future placement opportunities. All those interviewed, perhaps initially indicated by their willingness to be involved in the research, showed a strong desire to be supportive and helpful in assisting the students outdoor and academic journey. This was tempered on the condition that the students showed appropriate disposition and recognised that from the perspective of the 'host', a placement student is a 'nice to have' and not business critical.

In practice this means that if placements are to continue to be a central facet of an academic programme then more consideration should be afforded to pre-placement preparation of the students. For example, providing students with sufficient time to contact placements and providing potential placement 'hosts' with sufficient lead up time in order to prepare. Through addressing this key issue at an early stage in the process both student and placement 'host' will be more able to accommodate, both literally and figuratively the logistical demands of the placement and in doing so maintain a placement experience which is authentic and meaningful to all stakeholders.

Furthermore, within this pre-placement process there needs to be an appropriate amount of time devoted to equipping the students with information on what to expect when in the

workplace and the level of professionalism expected, whilst at the same time being attentive to the more logistical aspects (e.g. how to secure and then actually travel to the placement).

As a closing thought it would be ill advised to think that there is an ideal model of placement due to the benefits that may arise from the alternates. However, if work placements are to be of full value to the various stakeholders, then perhaps they need to be designed with some acknowledgement to the components identified in the research.

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