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Placement Podcasts - the Employer's Perspectives

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‘PLACEMENT PODCASTS’ PROJECT UPDATE INCLUDING THE EMPLOYER’S PERSPECTIVE

1. INTRODUCTION

The University of Huddersfield is one of the UK’s top providers of sandwich education. (The University of Huddersfield Strategy Map, 2007) states that students can expect: ‘An education that challenges and creates excellent career opportunities,’ supported by our strapline, ‘Educating tomorrow’s professionals’. Baseline investigations in 2005 for the ‘Student Employability and Good Practice in Placement Provision’ project showed that only fifty percent of students who registered onto sandwich degrees took the one year work placement (Ward, 2006). This contrasts with anecdotal evidence from placement tutors suggesting that in the 1980s and 1990s it was almost one hundred percent. Experienced placement tutors suggested that many students now viewed placements as optional, and found it hard to convince them of the benefits. In 2006, further analysis on a cohort of around 2,000 students showed that those who undertook a sandwich placement benefited by gaining higher degree classifications, and improved job prospects with affiliated enhanced salaries. Research carried out by (Harvey and Little, 2006) demonstrated that student’s experiences of work placements are changing. However just as students needs change, so do those of the UK economy, in particular (Leitch, 2006) talks of need for higher level skills to sustain our place in the global workplace.

In phase one of the project, to develop this work further and to encourage more students to become aware of the benefits of work placement, it was decided to film and document a sample of the best ambassadors for work placements, in our view, the students who have already benefited from them. Final year students are often requested to talk to second year students about their placement experience. However this tends to only take place once in the year. These resources complement ‘live’ student talks, and also showcase a wider range of subject areas.

Although there are occasionally students who are unhappy with their placements, in order to showcase the benefits of this type of learning experience only those students who were enthusiastic were selected. In 2007 the project ‘Placement Podcasts’ filmed twelve students across a wide variety of ages and ethnicity who had undertaken a mixture of sandwich degree, professional placements, and shorter work placements. To allow access to the materials by a wide audience the films are hosted on the web and a DVD has been produced for students to watch in their own time. This first phase work was presented at WACE, 2007 in Singapore. The films to accompany this can be viewed at: <http://www.hud.ac.uk/tqef/placementvideo.html>. Phase two of the work was built upon feedback from phase one focus groups and placement tutors which indicated that it would be beneficial to follow students on their sandwich year, and include interviews with their employers and placement tutors. This discussion paper provides an overview of the employer’s perspective on work placements. It covers the triangular relationship between student, employer, and university. Benefits to students of work placements are also discussed.

2. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the project was to make generic films which could be used to show the benefits of work placements from a student’s perspective to their peers and potential students. They could be viewed in a student’s own time and dipped in and out of as required. In phase one students were invited to participate in the project via the university job shop. As this was primarily a promotional film, selection was based on

a short application form, which accessed the benefits that the students had described, together with their enthusiasm for work placements. Out of the forty applications, twelve were filmed whilst trying to embody a broad cross-section of disciplines, ages, genders, and ethnic backgrounds, including international representation. Differing types of placement were also considered including traditional 'sandwich', professional and short term. Each student undertook a fifteen minute filmed interview which was then edited, into a short individual film. A composite film was made which highlights the various learning experiences of the group of students. A DVD was produced which is available to placement students and other interested groups. It has also been shown at university open days to prospective students. The films are available for a wider audience via the university web site.

The second phase of the project is to build on the first phase by focusing on the views of employers, alongside the views of students and finally with placement tutors. Feedback from phase one university focus groups suggested concentrating on sandwich students and allowing tutors to undertake selection of employers and students to showcase a range of work placements. Feedback from placement office's suggested that students generally preferred local companies, such as engineering or chemical, with the more ambitious students looking for blue-chip hospitality or food manufacturing or highly specialised companies, such as yacht designers. A cohort of fourteen students on placement with nine employers are being interviewed across a broad range of work areas. The cohort was restricted to this number due to the time consuming nature of the project. Initial filming of students took place at the university in late 2007. Mid placement updates in spring 2008 with students filmed at their place of work and employers interviewed alongside students. Final 'catch up' films are planned for late in 2008 with students reflecting on their placements and tutors views on how students have developed over the placement period. Each filmed interview is edited from its original thirty to around two to three minutes to extract the main points. Material from this second phase will be published on the web.

3. FINDINGS – THE EMPLOYER'S VIEW

Discussion with employers on their reasons for employing a placement student has been the highlight of the project to date. Whilst there are many case studies on student's views, there is much less work on the employer's perspective. Many employers had been placement students themselves and consequently very supportive of the value of sandwich placements. Some commonalities have emerged with the strongest factor in offering the work placement opportunity being the ability to demonstrate a genuine interest in the job, the company and its area of work. The enthusiasm of students is therefore one of the key reasons for employing them and explains why they quickly become such a valued member of the team. Employers are not expecting the 'finished product' and all saw their role to develop and train professionals for the future. Our project emphasised there is not a huge difference between what an employer expects of the placement student and a new graduate. With some employers stating that they would only take a graduate with work experience anyway. Employers indicated they would be more 'forgiving' of mistakes made by placement students, although they did not recall placement students making many mistakes. Finally, students who are able to articulate the relevance of their part-time work are at a distinct advantage. Employers want to hear about real examples of showing initiative E.g. one student who had worked in a bar explained how re-locating the bottle bins led to better workplace design.

Some examples from the filmed work show the skills and attributes that employers want. These include an engineering manager at an international food company who said he looked for students who were interested in pursuing a career in engineering but was surprised at how many had ambitions to become the next managing director. A textile employer loved the 'car load' of samples brought by a student to interview. It showed her development through both high school and university, demonstrating that she had the practical skills alongside the commitment and perseverance to be successful. A fashion student on placement with a major sportswear firm got the job because she was the student who 'pestered' the employer the most. Her persistence, determination and desire to work convinced them to offer her the placement. The gains are not all on the employer's side with students also bringing considerable value to the employer. In particular the learning and understanding of recent academic and wider market place developments can be disseminated amongst work colleagues and used to inform business practice. Students often challenge existing processes and procedures, bringing with them the academic perspective, analytical skills and perhaps more importantly a fresh pair of eyes to look at how things are done. This is particularly important in organisations with an established workforce. Additionally students are often keen to volunteer for research projects and work that will benefit both the business and their personal learning. Finally, students tend to acquire skills and develop personally and professionally much quicker than school leavers. This flexibility can allow them to 'cover' for colleagues in other parts of the organisation. Students are able to take on more advanced projects as the placement progresses with many starting off in relatively junior posts and learn on the job alongside other employees. Employers become aware of the student's development and can gradually increase responsibilities. For example the following ladder of growth can be seen by a new recruit in the hospitality industry. The student starts off by helping at functions, as s/he become familiar with the role independent team-supported work is undertaken. Supervisory skills are developed by overseeing the work of agency staff. Once sufficient competency has been gained in managerial, planning and organisational skills the student progresses to independently managing their own small dinner function. This leads onto the management of larger proceedings, perhaps a conference and culminates with the sole responsibility for organising an event such as a wedding where attention to detail and client satisfaction are critical. Finally, many employers said it would be hard to replace the students, and it is obvious that students quickly become key members of a team. One employer said that they had a choice when making an appointment – they could either appoint an administrative assistant or a student as the wages for the post were similar. However, she reported some key differences between the students and the assistants. Students were genuinely interested in the company, whereas often assistants just wanted a job. Initial output levels tended to be similar and the same amount of work could be covered. However students showed more flexibility and were happy to move to other departments to cover for holidays or sickness, it was all extra experience for the students – whereas extra work for the admin staff. Due to the willingness of the student to learn and experience as much as possible, three to six months on, there was a huge difference between what the two worker groups were able to do.

4. FINDINGS – THE TRIANGULAR RELATIONSHIP

The triangular relationship between student, employer and University is critical to the success of work placements. Most employers work closely with the University, with

many having strong relationships built up over several years. Others who have less contact feel that the university is there when needed. Employers feel that students are their workers for a year and often that they are offering a one year 'work-trial'. Many employers hope their students will return following completion of the degree, but also feel that they are doing a service to their industry by training the professionals of the future. Students tend to be quick to train with keenness and flexibility. This can allow them to move around the company as business needs dictates. In particular their development of higher level skills over the course of a year, allows for students to be assigned project work of a much deeper nature than with a shorter work placement. The benefits of work placements are well documented from a student's perspective. Following students on their workplace 'journey', has confirmed the positive impact on the development and growth of skills and self-assurance. Many start off shy and unsure of themselves. They find the requirement to work within a 'real' team, communicating with colleagues, expressing ideas and solving problems improves their confidence exponentially. Students appreciate the opportunity to use specialist equipment in a 'real-life' setting. Placement also offers students the chance to widen social circles and improve time-management skills. From the student perspective it is a chance to 'try out' a career, and decide whether it is right for them. Occasionally a placement leads to a student deciding on a different career path with the benefit of experience from the placement year.

The visits made by tutors and the knowledge that the students bring back helps to keep the University informed about changes and improvements in business practice. Both employers and tutors seem to benefit from shared communication about how the University and industry can support each other.

Placements also provide the university with a first contact point for employers. Over time these links can be developed and may prove fruitful in terms of consultancy, knowledge transfer and related activities.

5. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT

The project aims to document the placement life-cycle and include views from all perspectives of the triangular relationship. The films are a generic resource which can be watched at the convenience of the viewer, be it students, academics or potential employers, who can dip in and out as required. The format provides a visual documentation of students' development and growth throughout the process thus aiding an understanding of how the three 'partnerships' complement and benefit each other. The project aims to enhance students' awareness of employers needs, thereby enabling better preparation for the placement experience.

Initial feedback from phase one showed that many people enjoyed watching the films with much interest being generated at dissemination events. Over 50 internal staff personally requested a DVD and over 700 DVDs have been distributed to date.

The visits made by tutors and the knowledge that the students bring back helps to keep the University informed about changes and improvements in business practice. Both employers and tutors seem to benefit from shared communication about how the University and industry can support each other. Placements also provide the university with a first contact point for employers. Over time these links can be developed and may prove fruitful in terms of consultancy, knowledge transfer and related activities. From a marketing perspective, working with business is an important part of the university agenda. Our university strategy contains aim A7: '*to produce employable and enterprising graduates*'. One employer has already

requested to host our materials on their corporate website. As the films were made by a central teaching quality enhancement team an overall view of the process can be seen, and differences in approaches of the schools compared. Findings from the first phase were disseminated internationally at WACE in Singapore, 2007. UK dissemination was at ASET (Association for Sandwich Education and Training) Annual Conference where it was voted top paper by attendees.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The primary aim of this project is to showcase the benefits of work placements to students. Phase one of the project and associated dissemination has shown the resources to be popular. Students and tutors have been viewing the DVDs, often in facilitated discussions. Externally this work has been showcased at conferences where delegates said that films in this area are the first they have come across. It has inspired other institutions to think about this approach or variations of it. For example Ulster University has used produced films of employers marketing difficult to fill placement vacancies. Primarily, the work of the project supports both staff in placement offices and busy placement tutors. A frequent comment is: 'I would have liked to have done this project, if only I had time'.

In phase two by highlighting the employers' perspective it is hoped that students will receive a broader appreciation of why undertaking course related work experience is so important for their future career prospects. Hearing direct from the employer what they are looking for in a potential employee is a valuable insight. The employers' interviewed during this project have all said that enthusiasm a positive attitude and a desire to learn are of most importance as work skills can easily be taught. A genuine interest in the job role and company also makes a huge difference to who they select. Likewise the information that employers do not really treat placement students any differently to newly recruited graduates implies that they are trusted and their competency is recognised. The triangular relationship has been seen to benefit and supports all three partners.

As is often the case with research, this project leaves many more questions than it answers. Further work will involve inviting staff to consultation events. At these the work to date will be shown and discussions held on how it can be further disseminated within the schools. How the findings can be embedded into the curriculum will also be investigated.

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