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Available online: 21 Jul 2011

To cite this article: Annamari Ylonen (2011): Student ambassador experience in higher education: skills and competencies for the future?, British Educational Research Journal, DOI: 10.1080/01411926.2011.583636

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2011.583636

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Student ambassador experience in higher education: skills and competencies for the future?

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Lifelong learning, where individuals keep modifying, renewing and updating their existing skills and competencies, is an essential requirement in the knowledge economy. Yet research has shown that employers often find it hard to hire individuals who are equipped with sufficiently rounded competencies in areas such as commitment, enthusiasm and timekeeping. The Student Ambassador (SA) scheme offers university students the opportunity to undertake relatively well-paid and flexible part-time jobs around widening participation initiatives, which, in general, focus on raising aspiration and attainment of young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds. This article examines research evidence into the SA scheme in South-East London and, in particular, focuses on analysing whether the scheme offers students an ideal part-time job opportunity while in higher education. It will be seen that SAs not only gain complex transferable skills while earning money, but also engage in something that they perceive to be a highly rewarding and valuable experience.

Introduction

The Aimhigher programme is one of the previous Labour Government’s initiatives to widen participation in higher education (HE) for under-represented groups and is related to their target of increasing HE participation among 18- to 30-year-olds (HEFCE, 2008). The origins of the programme date back to the Dearing Report of 1997, which investigated the state of higher education in the UK, and to the earlier Robbins Report (1963), which demonstrated the gap in HE participation across different socio-economic groups and recommended expansion (HEFCE, 2008). Widening participation initiatives focus mainly on raising aspiration and attainment among young people of the target group through both one-off and

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ISSN 0141-1926 (print)/ISSN 1469-3518 (online)/11/000001-11
© 2011 British Educational Research Association
DOI: 10.1080/01411926.2011.583636
sustained activities such as residential summer schools, school visits, taster days and mentoring. Student ambassadors (SAs) play an important role in actively helping to run these activities and sometimes occupying a central role, for example, in mentoring type activities.

A lack of research and literature on student ambassadors is evident and as a result relatively little is known about the work of SAs and impact of the scheme. This could relate to the fact that there is no one model of the SA scheme in place in the UK HE institutions. Previous research has focused on the mentoring side of SA work (see e.g. Colley, 2003; Terrion & Leonard, 2007 for a discussion) or on the relationships between SAs and young people in HE decision-making processes (see Gartland & Paczuska, 2007). The focus of this article is on examining the impact of the scheme on the ambassadors themselves from the point of view of benefits gained in terms of skills, competencies and experience. It is asked whether the scheme offers an ‘ideal’ part-time job opportunity for those who participate.

Students and part-time work

It is common that university students undertake some form of part-time employment to supplement their income and to add to their skills base to enhance future employability. In the competitive and flexible labour market in the twenty-first century, graduates who possess well-rounded and comprehensive skills are likely to have the edge over those graduates who do not have previous work-experience.

There is evidence to show that a higher percentage of undergraduate students are engaged in some form of part-time work than their equivalents were before maintenance grants were abolished in the late-1990s (e.g. Curtis & Shani, 2002; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; NUS, 2008; Richardson et al., 2009). It has been estimated that between 35 and 60% of full-time undergraduate students work at some point while studying in term-time—there is considerable variation in the percentages between different higher education institutions (HEIs) (Curtis & Shani, 2002; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; NUS, 2008; Richardson et al., 2009).

With the new Conservative–Liberal Democratic Coalition Government’s announcement in early November 2010 that tuition fees will go up dramatically, the issue of student part-time employment may become increasingly topical. Since future higher education students will have to face the prospect of being more than three times as much in debt as current students after finishing their studies, more may turn to part-time employment to support themselves financially. As the existing cap of £3290 a year will be lifted and universities will be able to increase their tuition fees to £6000 a year, while the top universities, the so-called Russell Group Universities (including Oxford, Cambridge, the LSE and UCL) can start charging their future students up to £9000 a year in fees (Shepherd and Stratton, 2010).1

Balancing part-time work with studying responsibilities can be difficult for students, especially so for poorer working-class students who may have to rely on their part-time wages to make ends meet while in HE. The temptation to work longer hours can have a negative impact on academic success in HE and can also
affect students’ ability to have a social life and feel integrated with their HE institutions (see, e.g., Canny, 2002; Curtis & Shani, 2002; Richardson et al., 2009). These factors may have a detrimental effect on the ability of students to have a fulfilling and rewarding HE experience and in the worst case it can result in a student having to leave university before completion (Curtis & Shani, 2002).

The question of volunteering also has relevance here, as volunteering can assist students in developing and improving their existing skills-base. Not much is known statistically about student volunteering in terms of numbers and student characteristics. As Holdsworth and Quinn (2010) have argued: ‘despite political rhetoric in support of these activities... evidence of the outcomes of student volunteering is piecemeal and fragmented’ (p. 114). However, the reasons for volunteering may increasingly reflect instrumental motives rather than altruistic ones as graduates have to compete for a limited number of jobs in the highly competitive field of graduate recruitment and thus ‘standing out of the crowd’ is important (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010).

Part-time work—whether paid or unpaid—is likely to provide students with skills, competencies and experience that are beneficial for their future employability although this link is hard to prove statistically due to a lack of reliable national data. Transferable skills are highly valued by employers as they can be transferred from one situation to another. In general, ‘transferable skills’ are attributes acquired in education and training that are not specific to the subject studied, but are skills and abilities that can assist students to enter the world of work or other activities (Yorke, 2006). These include specific skills such as communication, oral presentation and IT, but also more abstract skills like flexibility, confidence and time management, ability to work as a member of a team and under pressure (Payne & Whittaker, 2006). Yorke and Knight (2004) separate personal qualities such as independence and adaptability from core skills such as numeracy, creativity, listening and oral presentation and process skills, which include more abstract skills such as planning, influencing, decision-making and team work. Together these skills comprise ‘employability’, which an individual can continue to develop throughout life (Yorke, 2006).

It has been argued that businesses in the UK are unable to recruit employees who have the required skills to meet business objectives (Westwood, 2004). Changing labour market trends—in particular, a decline in manufacturing jobs and an increase in service sector jobs—together with technological advances mean that there is an increased demand for employees with higher level skills and qualifications (Belt et al., 2010; UKCES, 2010). Generic skills have also been identified as one crucial aspect for future economic growth in a recent audit by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES, 2010). This was also highlighted in the earlier Leitch Report (2006), which argued that in terms of skills development it is necessary that ‘the UK will be on a higher trajectory toward increased productivity, growth and social justice, meeting the challenge of increased prosperity and fairness in the new global economy’ (p. 25).
The most common skills deficiencies according to a survey carried out by the Institute of Employment Studies and MORI in 2002 were communication skills, customer handling, teamwork and problem-solving (Westwood, 2004). A later study by the Council for Industry and Higher Education in 2008 found that employers want to ensure that graduates are equipped with both technical and generic skills and are thus prepared for the world of work (Connor & Hirsh, 2008). There are some encouraging findings relating to skills levels of graduates by the National Employer Skills Survey 2009, which found that over four-fifth of employers who had employed graduates under the age of 24 in the past 12 months thought that they were well prepared for work (Belt et al., 2010). The picture therefore may not be quite as bleak as suggested by surveys such as those carried out by the Institute of Employment Studies and MORI (Westwood, 2004). Nevertheless, one specific goal of the previous Government’s Skills Strategy for England focused on increasing both quantity and quality of employable graduates (Belt et al., 2010).

All in all, it is clear that transferable skills are important for individuals to enhance their employability, for employers to find qualified and able employees and for the economy that needs highly skilled workforce for economic growth and competitiveness.

Methods

The research set out to examine what motivates students to become SAs and the views of SAs about the qualities they hoped to gain, and actually gained, while working on the scheme in one Aimhigher Partnership in South-East London. It is asked whether the SA scheme provides those who take part in the scheme with the various transferable skills that employers want graduates to possess when they enter the labour market. The methods used included two separate pieces of qualitative interviews with SAs carried out in 2006 and 2007, which were supplemented with two online surveys sent to all new SAs in 2009 at the beginning of their employment and in 2010 as a follow-up survey with the same group of SAs. Given the nature of the study as an attempt to explain phenomena and a subsequent need for rich and detailed data, an emphasis was placed on qualitative methodology through in-depth interviews, which the surveys supplemented and allowed a further exploration of themes which had emerged in the interview data, in particular in relation to the area of skills and competencies. The utilisation of surveys also meant that a larger number of SAs could be reached and included in the research than if interviews alone were used. The first survey focused on exploring the reasons why the SAs had embarked on the scheme while the second survey focused on finding out what kinds of skills and competencies the SAs had gained while doing the job. Both surveys utilised different types of questions, for example, multiple choice, attitude scales and open-ended questions.

In the first round of interviews 19 SAs in total were interviewed in four separate focus groups over a two-week period in the spring of 2006. The second round of
interviews consisted of individual interviews with 11 SAs and two SA co-ordinators over a two-month period in the summer of 2007. The SAs interviewed were predominantly female and white, with ages ranging from 18 to 25, and they were based at four different universities within the Partnership area (two pre-1992 and two post-1992 universities) studying a wide range of subjects. The interviewees were selected on the grounds of convenience and availability (i.e. an opportunistic sample) and therefore broader generalisations to the population level cannot be made. However, the findings shed light on the nature of the SA work, which by and large remains an under-researched area. The focus group interviews were not recorded, but notes were taken during the interviews, which were later word-processed and thematically analysed. All one-to-one interviews were recorded, transcribed in verbatim and analysed using elements of grounded theory with the aim of developing localised explanations through an emphasis on coding, categorising and comparing of data (Denscombe, 2007). The online surveys, on the other hand, were distributed by an Internet-based survey tool (Survey-Monkey) to all new SAs in the four universities ($n = 380$), first in the autumn of 2009 and, second, in the summer of 2010 in the form of a follow-up survey to the 2009 survey. In the first survey the overall response rate was 31% (a total of 117 SAs responded) while the second follow-up survey attracted a 22% response rate (a total of 84 responses were received). An overwhelming majority of the survey respondents were female (72%), in the 18–20 age group (38%) or the 21–23 age group (35%), White (59%) and studying full-time (96%). In addition, 48% of the respondents were in their first year of study, followed by 35% in their second year of study; 83% of the new SAs were studying at an undergraduate degree level.

**What motivates students to become SAs?**

In the first survey, a question was posed asking the SAs to state the main reasons they embarked on the scheme. A total of 105 SAs responded to this question. Perhaps unsurprisingly, work experience and earning money emerged as the two most commonly stated reasons with 72 and 71% of SAs, respectively, choosing these options. A general interest in the scheme was the third most common reason chosen by 66% of the respondents. This was followed by a desire to improve their CV (53%), enhanced communications skills (44%), a general interest in teaching (43%) and a desire to boost self-confidence (31%). Twelve respondents identified other reasons. A few said they enjoyed working with young people, one that it was for a good cause while three individuals said they wanted to promote their institution. One respondent pointed out that: ‘I have always wanted to make a difference in society and I believe working as a SA will put me on the right platform to do so’.

A follow-up question asked the SAs to state whether their decision to enter the scheme was largely influenced by financial considerations. Bearing in mind that, while a considerable number of SAs stated that earning money was an important reason for them to take part in the scheme (see above), only 17% confessed that
this was indeed their main motivation, while 9% were not sure. It appears therefore that there is some reluctance among the SAs to confess the importance of financial motives for taking part: the respondents may therefore appear more altruistic than they actually are based on the answers they have given.

Did the interview data throw any more light on these issues? The SAs who were interviewed commonly highlighted both altruistic and instrumental reasons as being important to them, as seen below. This finding corresponds with Taylor’s (2008) research findings investigating a scheme not dissimilar from the SA scheme (‘Students into Schools’). Taylor’s research focused on finding out, for example, what motivated participants in this scheme to take part and it came to the conclusion that the process of helping others allowed skills to be gained which were seen as being helpful for students’ future employability. The issue of employability is further developed below. While many of those SAs interviewed suggested that they enjoyed helping people and that this motivated them to enter the scheme (i.e. an altruistic reason), this did not mean that the financial side was unimportant. Indeed, a large majority of the SAs interviewed agreed that being paid was very important to them (i.e. an instrumental reason). This is not really surprising taking into account the financial hardship that many students face while in university and after graduation and correlates with the survey findings discussed above. The financial motives for students undertaking part-time work at University of Worcester were also highlighted in research by Richardson et al. (2009), who found that of the sample of 215 students over 80% claimed financial reasons were the most important.

A small number of interviewees suggested that if the role was unpaid they would still consider taking part, but perhaps not to the same extent: ‘If it wasn’t paid I’d still do it, but just not as often’. The issue of volunteering is further developed in a section below. For the majority being paid well was important—and so was the satisfaction that the job offered. The SAs interviewed commonly described the job as rewarding, satisfying and enjoyable because it enabled them to work with less advantaged children and young people trying to inspire and help them to make the most of their lives. The interviewee SAs often referred to being seen as role models, which was a responsible but rewarding experience.

But, how, if at all, does the SA experience enhance the employability of the participants and provide them with skills and competencies for the future? It emerged that employability was a key motivating factor that united most of those interviewed and explained why they had opted to enter the scheme. Almost all SAs interviewed mentioned that being part of the scheme would make them more employable because of the skills they would acquire, which are attractive to future employers. These skills include communication skills, organisation skills, leadership, time management, adaptability and flexibility as well as awareness of diversity and equal opportunities issues. Even if the main motivation for some of the students was earning money, the scheme still enabled them to gain skills which could be seen to be highly beneficial for their future employability. For those who were considering a career in teaching, the SA experience had the added benefit of
providing the students with insightful knowledge and experience in the field. A small number also suggested that the SA experience had inspired them to become teachers themselves. The three quotes below show how the SAs felt about their enhanced employability:

Since being in this job my confidence has gone from quite low...to going out and speaking to big groups of people...so I do think that confidence is a big part of why people would come along to do the job of an ambassador.

It shows you have got a lot of skills—communication skills, working with children—all those are employability skills.

I think employers more and more look to what else you have, and something like being a student ambassador shows that you did something—you made a commitment to do something.

**Benefits of the SA experience**

How did the SAs rate their own personal skills development after gaining experience on the ground? This area was explored in second follow-up survey. In general, the SAs who responded felt that they had acquired a large variety of transferable skills as seen below (see Table 1).

In the areas examined a majority of SAs thought that they had experienced improvement ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’. Improvements in self-confidence, communication skills, teaching skills, leadership skills, team working and flexibility were particularly notable, with 60% or more of respondents stating that their skills had improved ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’. Based on the views of the SAs, it is clear that a majority of the respondents felt that they have experienced significant

<table>
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<th>Table 1. Skills and qualities acquired by the SAs as percentages (n = 84)</th>
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<td>Please rate how much improvement or development you have experienced in gaining the following skills and abilities during your time as a student ambassador? (based on 84 responses)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A great deal (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
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<td>Communication skills</td>
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improvements in areas which are likely to benefit not only their future employability, but also their overall HE experience as many of these skills and competencies are valuable assets for academia.

These findings correspond with research findings by Curtis and Shani (2002), who found that the most important benefit to students from undertaking part-time work, as assessed by students themselves, was improved skills in areas such as communication and a boost in confidence.

Volunteering

It was of interest to find out what current SAs would think about the prospect of volunteering if the scheme was unpaid. This is a topical issue for a number of reasons. First, given that earning money emerged as an important motivation for the SAs to enter the scheme in the first survey, it was interesting to see what views the respondents had about the prospect of volunteering. Second, as universities are under financial constraints and may be considering budget cutting measures, it is important to explore alternatives to paid SA schemes. One aim of the follow-up survey was therefore to map the views of the respondents to the idea of volunteering and see whether, in theory, this could present a potential future SA model to be utilised in the Partnership area and beyond. The findings raise some interesting questions about the relationship between students and part-time work.

Just over half (52%) of the respondents said they would volunteer, 22% said they would not volunteer and 25% did not know. Although just over half were in principle in favour of volunteering, the qualitative comments revealed that the picture was not as clear as it could be initially assumed. Those who answered ‘yes’ commonly went on to provide reasons that in practice might seriously limit the time these students would volunteer. Therefore a large number suggested that they would not want to dedicate as much time to the scheme if it was unpaid. Some provided instrumental reasons such as that they would volunteer but only in order to have this experience stated in their CV. Some considered volunteering, but also reasoned that they would still need a paid part-time job in addition to volunteering to be able to cope financially. The comments below demonstrate the variety of views on the question of volunteering:

It is incredibly rewarding work and widening participation...is something that I believe in passionately. However, if all work was unpaid then I probably realistically wouldn’t do as much as I would have to find another part time job to fund my living costs at university.

Although money is an important part, my interest in teaching and working with young people makes the scheme seem less like work and something that I would do in the capacity of a volunteer. Not to mention the prestige of representing the college.

No, because although it provides useful experience, ambassadors are still providing a service.
I wouldn’t be able to devote time to it otherwise as I would have to have a part-time job too.

If it was unpaid, I would prefer to find volunteering roles that are more appropriate to my programme of study.

A question can be asked as to whether students would be committed to the SA scheme on a longer-term basis if the work was unpaid, as it is likely that being paid acts as an incentive for the students to maintain reliability and commitment. Furthermore, it can also be asked whether the voluntary nature of the scheme would lead to an over-representation of more privileged and financially better off students as SAs since these students are less likely to be relying on paid jobs to make ends meet. The result of this, then, would be that the SA population would be less diverse in nature than it has been in the past. For a scheme that, partly at least, promotes widening access in HE, this would not be a desirable outcome. It could also be that as the cap in tuition fees is lifted and students have to be prepared to take up higher levels of student loan (Shepherd & Stratton, 2010), the number of students willing to undertake unpaid volunteering jobs may also decline. It remains to be seen what the impact of higher tuition fees will be on student part-time work and volunteering.

Discussion

The paper has examined research findings into the SA scheme in one Aimhigher Partnership to evaluate why students want to become SAs and what skills they take away from the scheme. The surveys showed that the SAs embarked on the scheme for a number of reasons, but that financial motives and the desire to gain work experience dominated. This was also confirmed in the interviews with SAs, who commonly suggested that earning money was important, but so were more altruistic motives such as helping, inspiring and coaching more disadvantaged children and young people in order to motivate them to enter higher education. The scheme, by default, allows the SAs to develop many different types of skills and competencies, which are likely to benefit these students in the future when entering the labour market, including such transferable skills as communicating with different groups of people, teaching/mentoring, presenting often complex information and organising activities. It could be argued that those students who have SA experience are likely to fill the skills gap, which has been identified by employers as something that many graduates lack (see, e.g. Westwood, 2004; Connor & Hirsh, 2008). Even for those who enter the scheme primarily to earn money, the situation could be termed as being ‘win–win’ since it is likely that SAs gain skills that will be highly valued by future employers even if the main motivations are financial. Another benefit to students is the flexibility of the SA scheme, which means that work and studying commitments can be easily combined.

The job satisfaction of the SAs has been seen to be high. Whether the experience actually enhances the students’ employability is, of course, subject to further
research and investigation on labour market outcomes and progression. The SAs in general feel, however, that the experience has provided them with many positive attributes likely to give them an added edge when entering the world of work. This confidence and optimism in their achievements and skills gained is likely to assist the SAs at the often difficult transitional stage when the student role has to be modified and changed to become that of a fully-fledged member of the labour market.

What does the future hold for the SA scheme? Are higher education students in the future going to be in a position to benefit from taking part in the scheme? These are interesting times for the Aimhigher programme and the SA scheme in general. As funding for the programme in its current form will come to an end in the middle of 2011 (HEFCE, 2008), it remains to be seen what the future holds for the SA scheme. Are universities going to find alternative ways to finance the scheme, or at least parts of it? Or are they going to dramatically reduce the scope of the scheme or perhaps end it all together? A question can also be raised as to whether the SA scheme could, and would, work if it was based on volunteering. In theory this might be an attractive option for universities wishing to continue running the SA scheme if and when existing finances are no longer available. The research findings examined in this paper suggest, however, that students would be unlikely to be so keen to become SAs if the role was unpaid. This message came out in both the surveys and the interviews: although financial reasons were not the only motives for students to enrol in the scheme, they were nevertheless important for the majority. An additional problem could relate to the recruitment of SAs. Even if students could still enhance their employability by volunteering to work as SAs, there could be significant problems in recruiting high quality candidates to fill the posts. These are issues that universities may have to consider when planning the future of their SA schemes in uncertain financial circumstances.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Gwen Evans and David Chilosi for carrying out the interviews.

Note

1. This was the situation at the time of writing at the end of 2010—it has since become clear that most universities will apply to charge the maximum tuition fees of £9000 a year.

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