Development of Employability skills: what are students’ perceptions of the role of supervised work placements?

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Introduction:
It is the responsibility of universities (HEIs) to support the development of students’ employability skills and create a successful graduate. A need for the integration of employability skills into the curriculum is outlined in key reports (Wilson, 2012) and is seen as vital to the success of students.

- Knight and York (2002) define employability as “a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy”.

HEIs embed employability skills into the curriculum via a range of approaches including work placements. Our current degree pathway (BSc Biomedical Science) offers two different work placements;
- A six week ad-hoc research laboratory placement
- A year long placement in an NHS Pathology laboratory.

We were interested in how students’ perceive the role of such experiences in contributing to the development of their employability skills and future careers in Biomedical Science.

Research Questions:
- What are students’ perceptions of employability skills?
- To what extent do students perceive the two different workplace experiences as supporting the development of employability skills?

Methodology and study design:
The study is firmly positioned within a constructivist framework and consisted of two data collection phases.
- An electronic questionnaire to determine students’ definitions of employability skills - this informed questioning in the next phase.
- Face to face interviews to investigate the skills students identified as development in their ‘work experience’

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically

The USEM model of employability proposed by Knight and York (2002) was used as an interpretive framework for thematic coding.

![Figure 1: The USEM model of Knight and York. This model links personal qualities with the actual skills and knowledge needed to give broader personal effectiveness and employability (adapted from Cole and Tibby, 2013)](image)

E M U

- Personal qualities, including self-theories and efficacy beliefs
- Subject understanding
- Meta-cognition
- Skillful practices in context
- Broaden: personal effectiveness

E U

- Adaptability
- Initiative
- Confidence
- Motivation
- Commitment
- Time management
- Communication
- Organisation
- Perseverance
- Creativity
- Problem solving
- Analysis

Emerging themes and the USEM model:
- U & S - ‘6 week’ students felt that the experience provided preparation for the next stage of their studies supporting development of skills and knowledge. ‘Year-long’ students identified development of technical skills but that their academic knowledge had become stagnant during their year.
- E - All students felt that the placement supported their personal development; “I feel empowered and proud that I have accomplished some things I never thought I would” (Year-long)
- ‘Well I think it helped me grow as a person and grow up a bit’ (6 week)

M - ‘6 week’ students felt the placement provided the chance for autonomy and time to explore and ‘discover’. Year-long students focused upon completion of the training programme and set competences.

Discussion and conclusions:

- Questionnaire responses = students are able to define a range of employability skills, although as they move closer to graduation these definitions focus more upon skills for practice - S
- To allow development of employability skills a key feature of authentic work-based learning is a focus on work as a learning activity rather than just as a ‘placement activity’ (Garnett, 2014)
- The focus of the 6-week placement is seen by students as enabling exploration and experimentation. They identified the development of metacognitive skills related to self-awareness, independence and adaptability
- Year-long students focused upon completion of the registration portfolio and development of specific technical skills. Students did not identify the benefit of the practicum beyond these set tasks; limiting their development of U, S and M.

Space for discovery, exploration and time to ‘go wrong’ should be built into work placements to support USEM - in a learning-outcome-driven system focused upon demonstration of professional competences this becomes a challenge.

![Figure 2: Electronic questionnaire responses from level 4 and 6 students. Level 4 students identified many important characteristics including adaptability and initiative. Interestingly, at level 6 the focus was limited; teamwork and communication were the most frequent responses with limited identification of metacognitive skills.](image)

References