Employability and work-based learning

Brenda Little and ESECT colleagues
Learning and Employability Series 1 and 2

The Learning and Employability series is primarily intended for staff in higher education institutions who are considering the enhancement of student employability. The publications will also be of interest to colleagues new to the area as well as those who are already engaged in developing employability and who wish to broaden their understanding of the topic.

In response to demand we have updated and reissued a number of titles from the first series of Learning and Employability, originally published by the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) and the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT). We welcome suggestions for new titles in the series: email employability@heacademy.ac.uk.

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The Learning and Employability series is being extended by the Higher Education Academy and will reflect changing challenges and priorities in the relationship between higher education and the many work opportunities likely to need – or benefit from – graduate or postgraduate abilities.

The views expressed in this series are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Higher Education Academy.
Employability and work-based learning

About the author

Brenda Little is a Senior Policy Analyst with the Open University’s Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI). She was a member of the HEFCE-funded Enhancing Student Employability National Co-ordination Team. From 2002-5, her higher education (HE) research interests are primarily in the area of work-based learning, term-time working, graduate employability and HE-employer links. Her current and recent HE studies include an investigation of the extent and impact of debt and term-time work on HE in the UK (for Universities UK); and an investigation of the role and significance of vocational HE in meeting the needs of the economy and employers (for the Learning and Skills Council). Previous studies include a Review of Work-Based Learning in HE (with John Brennan, Director of CHERI); a study of Key Skills developed through Work Placements (for the Council for Industry and Higher Education); and a HEFCE-commissioned investigation into the Nature and Extent of Undergraduates’ Work Experience (with colleagues from University of Central England).

1. Introduction

In February 2000, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment called for all higher education students to have a minimum period of work experience. Underlying this ‘call’ we can assume there was a recognition that students gain something of value from work experience.

In this paper, we explore the learning that a student can gain from work experience, and we will use the term ‘work-based learning’ to mean learning that is derived specifically from doing a job of work and taking on a workplace role. Used in this sense, work-based learning is a more restricted notion than ‘work-related learning’ (which also has currency in higher education). Work-related learning is taken to mean any learning that is intended to enhance students’ grasp of working life or their employability. The continuing emphasis being given to work-related learning and work-based learning in higher education programmes demonstrates Government’s belief that the workplace can provide a suitable location (alongside others) for the development of higher level learning. Of course, there is nothing necessarily new here – the development of a higher education system more responsive to the needs of the economy and the individual has been ongoing for a number of years.

By ‘employability’, we mean a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations. Another paper in this Learning and Employability series (Yorke and Knight, 2004) adds that employability is a blend of understanding, skilful practices, efficacy beliefs (or legitimate self-confidence) and reflectiveness (or metacognition). Harvey (2003)
Employability and work-based learning describes some of the many ways in which these outcomes are fostered during the undergraduate years.

There is evidence that the whole environment, and not just the formal curriculum, contributes to learning in the undergraduate years (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Astin, 1997). In particular, for many students work-based learning may occur in the jobs they take to finance themselves through higher education. It is not necessarily the experience of work itself that is paramount – rather it is the learning that an individual derives from that experience of work and from reflecting upon it. A government-sponsored review (Brennan and Little, 1996) recognised that work-based learning could take many forms including a full-time undergraduate undertaking a work placement planned as part of the curriculum; a full-time undergraduate doing a part-time job; a full-time employee seeking to explore work-focused and work-related issues in the context of the knowledge, skills and values of a higher education institution. The common factor linking these forms was that the individual would be doing a job of work, or would be undertaking a work role.

Of course, employability can be enhanced by work-related activities which do not include doing a job of work. There has been a lot of interest in developing more authentic classroom tasks and in work-simulating activities. Some might argue that such activities can be just as valid for developing work-related skills, knowledge and dispositions as direct experiences of work. Some of the newly-introduced foundation degrees include opportunities to learn through work simulations. However, a recent report concerning young people, their employability and the processes of induction into the workplace concludes that:

...many of the employability skills that employers are seeking can only be learned in 'real life' situations, even on a temporary basis such as work placements of two or three weeks...there is a limit to the extent to which educational establishments can 'teach' the necessary skills and attributes, even where extensive efforts are made to simulate the work situation (Johnson and Burden, 2003: 39).

Consider also the aim, increasingly popular with policy-makers and higher education institutions, of fostering entrepreneurship through higher education. In another paper in this series on that topic, Moreland (2004) argues that higher education programmes must progressively confront students with complex, in-the-world activities that encourage reflection and risk assessment. We can see that a commitment to in-the-world activities, to experiencing organisational cultures and practices, implies a commitment to work-based learning. Moreland says that entrepreneurship is a sub-set of employability. We argue that it is also dependent on good quality work-based learning opportunities. When planning foundation degrees (in England and Wales), which are intended ‘to develop programmes that give students insights into the prospects of self-employment and develop entrepreneurial qualities’ (HEFCE, 2000: para. 23), curriculum designers are expected to integrate study and work through business-related projects and work-based learning.
Our primary focus in this paper is on full-time undergraduates and work-based learning, though some limited consideration is also given to work-based learning from the perspective of part-time students, and those individuals – primarily located in the workplace – who are using their work role and their workplace as the basis for creating their own higher education curriculum.

### 2. What has been the impact of work-based learning?

A large-scale UK study on the changing nature of graduate work, involving over 250 in-depth interviews in over 90 organisations with strategic and line managers and recent graduate and non-graduate employees, was undertaken in the mid-1990s (Harvey et al., 1997). Respondents were strongly of the opinion that work experience made an invaluable contribution to the personal and professional development of undergraduates.

Employers commented that those graduates who had undertaken a period of work experience during their degree programme possessed many of the skills essential for success at work: they were more mature, and had acquired attributes such as team-working, communication and interpersonal skills, as well as an awareness of workplace culture.

A more recent smaller-scale study of young people in Bradford entering their first full-time job after leaving school, college or university again shows the importance of work experience.

... [the role of work experience] is an issue on which there was almost complete unanimity between employers and young people. Almost without exception, employers felt that young people who had undergone a period of work experience while at school (either through formal programmes or through part-time work) were better equipped than others for the world of work. It seems that many of the employability skills that employers are seeking can only be learned in ‘real life’ employment situations [sic], even on a temporary basis such as work placements of two or three weeks. (Johnson and Burden, 2003: 39).

What about more mature students? Do they also derive similar benefits from work experience? Their maturity and (assumed) experiences of work prior to embarking on higher education might be taken to mean that they have already learned enough through work. For a partial answer, we can look to a study analysing factors determining graduate employability. The study was based on a nationally representative sample of students who graduated from first degree courses in 1994/95 and who were questioned about their employment experiences some three to four years after graduation. Analyses were undertaken which compared the experiences of particular groups of graduates – those from
lower socio-economic backgrounds; ethnic minority graduates; mature graduates – with the graduate sample as a whole (Blasko et al., 2002). The study found that for graduates as a whole there were measurable employment benefits to be gained from a substantial period of work experience during their time in higher education, especially for those who had taken a non-vocational course. But for mature students (those aged 25+ on entering higher education) work experience during higher education was not associated with the employment benefits it seemed to provide for other students. In this study, ‘employment benefits’ referred to a composite measure derived from features of an individual’s employment situation (for example, level of job, job satisfaction, salary).

Another measure of employment benefits, namely ‘having a job’ was used by Bowes and Harvey to investigate the relationship between planned work placements (in the form of sandwich courses) and subsequent employment outcomes (Bowes and Harvey, 1999). Their study was based on an analysis of first destination returns submitted to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for all degree qualifiers from higher education institutions in the UK in 1995-96. It should be noted that such data is collected just six months after graduation – a period when many graduates might not be actively seeking a career. The analysis found greater proportions of sandwich graduates were in full-time employment than those who had undertaken full-time courses (almost 70% sandwich compared with 55% full-time graduates). Thus it seems that sandwich students are advantaged in the labour market, at least in the early part of their careers. The extent of this advantage is dependent on subject area: science and language sandwich graduates do not seem to enjoy a significant advantage but built environment, business, engineering and social science sandwich graduates do. What an analysis of this nature cannot investigate is ‘why’ sandwich students have this advantage. One obvious possibility is that the work placement has given them a ‘toehold’ in an employing organisation, and has given the employer an opportunity to appraise a potential employee over a sustained period of time. A further explanation may relate to the student’s motivations to study and orientations to future labour market opportunities as evidenced by their having chosen to study on a sandwich course in the first place.

A separate study of art and design graduates (Harvey and Blackwell, 1999) found that graduates who had had some form of work experience were significantly more likely to be in full-time permanent employment than those with no work experience during their studies. Further, graduates with relevant work experience were more likely to have operated their own business since graduating – to be entrepreneurial – than other art and design graduates, and were less likely to have been unemployed.

Some forms of work-based learning seem, therefore, to be beneficial to graduates’ very early careers. What is perhaps less certain is the extent to which work-based learning during higher education enhances graduates’ employability over the medium-term. Does it, for example, enhance their performance in a job some time after graduation? Some answers come from an empirical investigation of universities’ efforts to enhance graduate employability and the extent to which they are successful in these endeavours (Mason et al., 2003). It focused on five subject areas: biological sciences, business studies, computer...
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science, design studies, and history. It included interviews with university departments, an analysis of HESA first destinations survey data, a telephone survey of recent graduates and a parallel survey of their immediate line managers. The analysis of HESA data again confirmed that sandwich placements were strongly and positively associated with employment status six months after graduation. However, this (and other forms of work experience during undergraduate studies) had no effect on any of the indicators relating to graduates’ performance some three years into their working lives. The researchers note that these findings suggest that any independent effects of employability skills development in higher education may be strongest in the very early stages of graduate careers and then tend to diminish rapidly over time as graduates acquire more job- and occupation-specific skills and knowledge through on-the-job training and experience.

From the foregoing, we see that the findings of empirical studies all tend to suggest that students who have gained work experience during higher education are more likely to make an early move into the labour market after graduation. The benefits are less clear cut in later employment. Some studies show later employment benefits for young students (but not for mature students), whilst others suggest that any advantages diminish rapidly over time, perhaps because those who secure jobs without having had work experience quickly make up the ground.

3. The organisation of and access to work-based learning

This section summarises some of the ways in which work-based learning is ‘delivered’. None is inherently superior to the others. What matters is the quality of arrangements for stimulating learning that enhances employability.

Certain higher education programmes have traditionally included planned elements of supervised work experience – for example, industrial placements in sandwich courses, and work practice-based elements in pre-clinical training and during initial teacher training undergraduate programmes. In recent years, there has been increasing use of planned devices to expose students more generally to the world of work. Moreover, outside the formal curriculum, work experience gained through paid employment (traditionally during vacation periods, but also increasingly during term-time) has become part and parcel of the undergraduate experience.

Three main categories of work experience have been identified (Harvey et al., 1998; Little et al., 2002):

1. Organised work experience as part of a programme of study
2. Organised work experience external to a programme of study
3. Ad hoc work experience external to a programme of study.
These categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Voluntary work, for example, can sometimes be accredited by institutions, is sometimes organised externally to the programme of study or may be ad hoc work undertaken by students. We will now look at each of these main categories in turn.

3.1 Organised work experience as part of a programme of study

There are three main variants:
• A conventional programme with some work-experience element attached to it, either as an optional or compulsory component.
• ‘Generic’ work-experience modules that are available to students on a range of programmes.
• Work experience through a programme that is wholly, or predominantly, delivered in the workplace setting.

3.1.1 Conventional programme plus work experience

Work experience on conventional programmes includes:
• Traditional placements on sandwich programmes
• Short periods of work experience on non-sandwich programmes
• Clinical or practice placements on some professional degrees.

Sandwich ‘placements’ are still taken as the paradigm for work experience. It is estimated that in 1998/99, 180,000 UK undergraduates were enrolled on sandwich programmes, and on non-sandwich programmes that included organised work experience including clinical and other short-term (‘thin’) placements during medical, health and teacher training (DfES, 2002). This figure represented 17.5 per cent of the total full-time undergraduate population, but it was recognised that the available data underestimated the full extent of programme-embedded work experience (Little et al., 2002). Absolute numbers on sandwich first degrees have been increasing (as overall enrolments in higher education have risen) but the proportion of the overall undergraduate population enrolled on them is less than 10 per cent, and has decreased in recent years as Higher Education Statistics Agency data show.

The proportion of sandwich students varies considerably between subjects. For example, around a quarter of undergraduates on agriculture, computer science, architecture, building and planning, and business and administrative studies programmes are sandwich students,
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whereas just two per cent of law undergraduates are classified as sandwich students, and
almost none are in humanities (HESA, 2003) The proportion of students on sandwich
courses also varies considerably between institutions. A study undertaken in 2001 found
that proportions ranged from 55 per cent at Aston University and 44 per cent at Sheffield
Hallam University to less than one per cent at Birmingham, Warwick and Durham
universities, and UMIST (Little, et al., 2002). Such variation will depend to an extent on the
subjects offered at undergraduate level, but will also be a function of institutions’ general
approaches to work placements.

In addition to sandwich programmes and full-time undergraduate programmes that include
compulsory blocks of professional practice, a significant minority of full-time students are
involved in short placements or ‘live’ projects with employers5. Some commentators have
suggested that a model of work-based learning built around ‘real-time’ or ‘live’ projects has
considerable potential for expansion – see, for example, Foster and Stephenson (1998).
However, it could be argued that such curriculum devices do not equate to work-based
learning as such – unless there is significant direct involvement of students in the
employer’s workplace.

3.1.2 Generic work experience modules

‘Generic’ work experience modules include:

• Year-long placements unconnected to a specific programme
• Credit for part-time, term-time or vacation work
• Credit for voluntary (unpaid) work

The University of Wales, Aberystwyth, has run a generic Year in Employment scheme for
over 20 years, an option taken-up by five per cent of its students. The general work-based
learning module at the University of Luton has been running since 1993. It was revised in

Table 1: Undergraduate sandwich students, UK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First degree, N =</th>
<th>Other undergraduate, N =</th>
<th>As % all undergraduates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997/98</td>
<td>115,743</td>
<td>8,059</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999/00</td>
<td>118,510</td>
<td>6,150</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001/02</td>
<td>120,655</td>
<td>5,525</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

June 2000 to incorporate a more structured approach to help students analyse and reflect upon their learning, and enables them to focus on a much wider spectrum of work-experience opportunities than conventional work placements. To date, this module has been taken by over 450 students from many different undergraduate programmes.

The University of Westminster Business School has introduced two modules to accredit work experience: ‘Learning from Work’ accredits learning from part-time paid work, and ‘Team Working and Leadership’ accredits learning from unpaid work in the community and environment. Both of these reflective-learner modules are designed to enhance employability skills, develop personal development plans and improve career management skills.

Finally (in this section), the University of Exeter’s independent work experience module is open to all undergraduates at the university who wish to gain academic credit for ‘learning from a structured reflection on work experience’ (www.services.ex.ac.uk/cas/employability/iwe/index.shtml). The work can be part-time during term, or part-time or full-time during vacation. It can be a project or placement, or it could be a voluntary activity (for example, working with the university’s students’ union – the Guild). The university stipulates that the paid work or voluntary activity should last a minimum of 50 hours, and that students have to engage in the work experience over a period of at least two weeks, but preferably for longer. Sheffield Hallam University has a similar scheme in which independent study is linked to Hallam Volunteering, amongst other similar activities.

As noted above, some institutions have developed frameworks through which students can gain credit for evidence of learning derived from paid employment or voluntary work. Many national organisations also actively support student voluntary work – Community Service Volunteers, Millennium Volunteers, and Student Volunteering England, for example. Individual university students’ unions have established student-led voluntary groups to organise and run voluntary activities within their local communities. The HEFCE Higher Education Active Community Fund (HEACF) specifically sought to encourage students to engage in voluntary work.

3.1.3 Work experience through a programme that is wholly, or predominantly, delivered in the workplace setting

Such programmes tend to bring together work-based learning modules, traditional taught modules (possibly drawn from existing university programmes) and accreditation for prior experiential or in-house certificated learning and are combined to form a coherent ‘whole’
Employability and work-based learning for an employee – or a cohort of employees – in a particular workplace. As such, the individual’s work role and organisational context is at the heart of the whole programme. Such programmes – of which there are, for example, foundation degrees in the area of Health and Social care – are more applicable to individuals who are primarily employees, rather than primarily full-time undergraduates (and thus are beyond the scope of this paper).

At Middlesex University, the National Centre for Work-Based Learning Partnerships promotes programmes of study (leading to undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications), which focus on individual work roles and organisational objectives: such programmes are designed to meet the needs of both employees and employers. The Centre sees a distinctive feature of such programmes as the opportunity for individuals to build on learning already achieved from work, education and training, and in most programmes participants engage in a process of recognising, analysing and reflecting upon their learning to-date (Middlesex University, 2002).

There are general design and quality issues associated with work-based learning organised as part of an undergraduate curriculum. They are arguably more extreme with this particular form of work-based learning. (See Boud, 1998, for an overview of such issues.)

3.2 Organised work experience external to a programme of study

Students may also undertake organised work experience external to the programme of study. The range of such opportunities includes national programmes, such as the Careers Research and Advisory Centre’s InsightPlus (www.insightplus.co.uk) and STEP (www.step.org.uk). CRAC’s InsightPlus helps students recognise the skills they develop during part-time employment, voluntary work or students’ union welfare work and representational activities, and accredits such learning with the Institute of Leadership and Management’s Introductory Certificate in First Line Management.

In contrast, STEP Enterprise arranges project-based placements for second-year undergraduates (typically during the summer vacation) in small companies and not-for-profit organisations. After initial induction and training, students are closely monitored by their local STEP co-ordinator who also provides training in report writing and presentation techniques. Many of the organisations that facilitate work experience also give annual awards, for example, the ‘most enterprising student’ (STEP); the ‘Trainee of the Year’ (International Association for Exchange of Students for Technical Experience). And to acknowledge the role played by host employers, the National Council for Work Experience (NCWE) has recently launched the NCWE Awards to highlight companies’ significant
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achievements in assisting with student training and development.

Alongside such national programmes, a number of more local schemes – often run by a single university – are also in operation. Examples of these include ‘Business Bridge’ (run in partnership by Liverpool John Moores University, The University of Liverpool, and Liverpool Hope University College), and ‘Sheffield Plus’ (run by the University of Sheffield).

The former LTSN Generic Centre (now part of the Higher Education Academy) published a guide for graduate employers on the different sorts of personal development initiatives taken by undergraduates outside their higher education programmes and often accredited by outside organisations (Lang and Millar, 2003). Many of these initiatives involve students undertaking work experience.

An earlier study of the nature and extent of undergraduates’ work experience tried to map this area of activity. The mapping considered the extent to which a higher education institution, or another organisation, was involved in making the work experience opportunity available, and the extent to which explicit support was provided to help students recognise the learning gained from the experience (see Little et al., 2002, Appendix 1 for examples). That study concluded that although considerable public attention had been drawn to initiatives of this sort, little was reliably known about the overall numbers of students benefiting from them.

3.3 Ad hoc work experience external to a programme of study

The expression ‘ad hoc’ is used to categorise work (paid or unpaid) that a student might undertake during higher education which is not planned at the outset as part of a taught programme, nor is the work ‘organised’ in the sense of being designed at the outset as a work experience process that encourages reflection on experience.

Although such work experience during short and long vacations has been an established part of an undergraduate’s higher education experience, the incidence of working during term-time – while studying full-time – is arguably a more recent phenomenon. Some institutions regularly conduct student surveys that gather data on the incidence of term-time working and the extent and nature of that work. Recent surveys indicate that more than half of full-time students work during term-time, and that they are working on average around 10-14 hours per week (Harvey, 2003:35). There are some indications that the proportion of full-time students working during term-time is increasing: the most recent DfES-commissioned Student Income and Expenditure Survey found 58% of students worked term-time during 2002–03, compared with 47% in 1998–99 (Callender and Wilkinson, 2003).
However, such aggregate figures mask variations between institutions in the incidence of term-time working. A study in Spring 2000 of four disparate UK universities found that in one (an ‘old’ university with high entry requirements) 27% of the standard-age undergraduates (those aged under 21 at start of their course) worked during term-time: in contrast, 60% of undergraduates at the ‘new’ university with low entry requirements were working during term-time (Metcalfe, 2003). The same study found the number of hours worked tended to rise as the status of the university declined. A more recent study of term-time working involving seven UK universities (commissioned by Universities UK) found a more complex pattern of incidence and intensity of term-time working amongst full-time undergraduates: low incidence of term-time working did not necessarily equate to low intensity of working (as indicated by hours per week worked) as the table below indicates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>HIGH proportion of students working (&gt;50%)</th>
<th>LOW proportion of students working (&lt;40%)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University F</td>
<td>University F 69% working</td>
<td>University D 37% working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>62% working high hours</td>
<td>52% working high hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>University A 53% working</td>
<td>University C 27% working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>67% working low hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Variation in incidence and intensity of term-time working among final year students

Source: Van Dyke, Little and Callender (2005) (Table 5.8)

Thus we see that term-time working is not evenly spread across the full-time undergraduate population. The UUK-commissioned study found that the likelihood of a student working during term-time was associated with a number of factors:

- Gender – women were more likely than men to work during term-time.
- Living arrangements – those living with their parents, or with partner/dependent children, were more likely to work than those living independently.
- Ethnicity – ethnic minority students were more likely to work than white students.
- Financial aspects – those who did not pay tuition fees, those with more debts, and those most concerned about their finances were more likely to work during term-time.
- Social class – those from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to work than those from higher socio-economic backgrounds.
- Entry qualifications – those with entry qualifications other than A levels were more likely to work during term-time (Van Dyke, Little and Callender, forthcoming).
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Other surveys have identified similar associations between specific student characteristics and the likelihood of working during term-time, and have also found that students living in London and in Scotland are more likely to work than students in other areas (Callender, 2005).

This is a convenient point at which to raise other issues to do with access to work-based learning. There are particular access issues for disabled students. The National Disability Co-ordination Team (funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland) is supporting projects which seek to ease some of these issues (www.natdisteam.ac.uk). Skill, the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities (www.skill.org.uk) is extending its pilot scheme to promote access to volunteering in London (following successful pilots in London and Edinburgh). The charity, Scope, also runs a Fast-Track scheme (www.scope.org.uk/work/ets/training/fast-track/hs~index.shtml) which aims to provide six-month placements in a range of large organisations for disabled students.

Although the main focus of this paper is full-time undergraduates, we also briefly consider the case of part-time students. Investigations into the experiences of part-time students at one university in the early 1990s found that some had difficulties in linking learning on the course to their workplace professional practices (McDowell, 1993, quoted in Brennan and Little, 1996). This had an unfortunate impact on their motivations to study. On the other hand, McDowell found that courses for part-time students which explicitly included activities to link the workplace and academic learning, and which gave some attention to career planning, seemed more successful at integrating academic knowledge, professional knowledge and professional practice. A recent study relating to vocational higher education (at sub-degree level) was also positive. It found part-time students studying on various courses – such as the HNC in Building and a professional accounting course – speaking positively about the way they were able to link experience of work tasks with taught aspects of their courses in a way that consolidated their learning (Little et al., 2003).

However, we need to be cautious before assuming that better provision of work-based learning opportunities means that all students will have ready access to them.

3.4. The organisation of work-based learning: issues of concern

This short review shows that there is no shortage of cases from which to learn about the provision of work-based learning. It also suggests some areas of concern about patterns of work-based learning provision.

1. Access. If work-based learning is so important, then there needs to be equal access to it.
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There are two faces to this. One is the great variation in provision of work-based learning opportunities. The other is that some students are not well placed to take advantage of work-based learning opportunities.

2. Diversity of work-based learning experiences. During 2003, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) undertook a review of a sample of 33 foundation degrees. The QAA looked at examples of real and simulated work-based learning. In around half of the programmes reviewed, QAA found a need for significant development of work-based learning, in particular to address the variability of student experiences across employment locations (www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/foundationdegree/overview/foundation.overview.asp).

3. Cost. A 2003 review of the Graduate Apprenticeship scheme found that almost half the original 78 schemes had been abandoned. Of the remaining 42, three quarters faced funding difficulties and one fifth had been subsumed within vocationally-oriented degrees (Bowers-Brown et al., 2003).

4. Quality. As we show in the next section, it is one thing to provide work experience and another to provide for good-quality work-based learning.

4. Transforming work experience into learning

Work experience itself is not necessarily intrinsically beneficial. It is the learning that an individual derives from the experience that is important. There are many theories underpinning processes of learning from experience which tend to encompass aspects of reflection and personal growth. In this section we look at how these theories have been distilled into more practical actions that have been promoted as ways of ensuring that learning from work experience does occur.

Blackwell and colleagues (2001) described four substantial studies of work-based learning and observed that the experience was not invariably a high quality one, nor did students necessarily consider that they had learnt a lot from it. They saw reflection as an essential complement to work-based learning. They argued that good quality work-based learning has six characteristics:

- Stakeholders – students, employers, academic staff and employees – all understand the underlying intentions. It is meaningful.
- The quality of work experience is greatly enhanced by prior induction and briefing for all concerned; by facilitation of ongoing reflection; by debriefing, reflection and identification of outcomes. Learning is the goal.
- Work experience is accredited so that it is taken seriously.
- Low-stakes or formative assessment is used to support the process of learning from work experience.
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• Students build up a work-experience portfolio.
• Students can say what they have learned, provide illustrations and, if need be, commentary. There is effective reflection.

This implies a seventh characteristic: learning from work experience is effective if quality is monitored.

If work experience is meaningful or relevant to future career development, then it appears to be more useful and effective as a learning tool in aiding personal development planning and in enhancing career prospects. If learning opportunities are to be maximised in ‘non-traditional’ forms of work experience, then students need some kind of structure and support in order that they can reflect upon and articulate the learning. The structuring can help them make sense of experiences that, at first sight, seem rather thin. For example, a recent small-scale study of first year students engaged in ‘group’ work placements with very small businesses found students were very negative about the placements: they wanted to be placed in larger organisations (which for them meant businesses with 20–30 employees) because they felt that these would offer better career prospects (Greenback, 2002).

It is generally recognised that if the learning from work experience is planned and intentional from the outset it is easier for students to reflect on it and identify what has been learned. This process can be supported by using learning contracts, which in the late 1990s were a common feature in programmes involving work-based learning (see Brennan and Little, 1996). Work-based learning contracts are one means by which an individual learner, their higher education institution and their (pro tem.) employer can negotiate, approve and assess the outcomes of a learning process, with both the higher education institution and the employer acting as a resource for learning. But as Brennan and Little (1996) noted, negotiated learning contracts assume shared understandings, priorities and motivations. They can also be quite costly, certainly in terms of time, to do properly.

As is well known in higher education, assessment strategies tend to influence students’ approaches to learning. Harvey (2003) noted there was some evidence that students prefer nationally-recognised accreditation of work experience to local schemes, but as yet there has been little progress, despite several attempts, towards a national scheme. The type of assessment ranges from ‘satisfactory completion’; specific credits for traditional sandwich placements; credit awarded towards degree classification for generic modules; or separate awards by the institution, employer schemes, or of an independent body (such as City and Guilds licentiateship, or NVQs). There is, though, little hard evidence that employers are interested in the accreditation of work experience (Harvey, 2003). With the increasing use of progress files in higher education institutions, the emphasis within institutions now seems to be shifting towards documenting evidence of learning from work experience through individual student progress files.

This still leaves higher education institutions with serious problems when it comes to
warranting or certifying competence and fitness to practise. As Knight and Yorke (2004a) explain in a companion paper, it is expensive to assess complex achievements – like those associated with work-based learning – with tolerable reliability, particularly as assessments should be based on evidence from several modules, not just from one. While there are good educational reasons for welcoming the use of progress files and well-documented claims to achievement, they rather duck what is, for many, a serious question: how is workplace learning, which is typically complex, to be judged with sufficient reliability for employers to trust the judgements?

To ensure that work experience is of high quality, employers, participating academics and students must all be committed to it and be fully aware of the implications of the various processes that help effective learning to be derived from work experience. Planning and responsibility for success need to be shared, which means adequate, trained and supportive supervision, both from the higher education institution and the employer. Students’ learning may be greatly enhanced by prior induction and briefing, facilitation of ongoing reflection by the student, debriefing and identification of outcomes. However, although many schemes refer to ‘preparing’ students for work placements, at least one study found that students on work placements tended to refer to their preparations in terms of help with securing a placement, rather than help with identifying and articulating learning gains (Little, 1998).

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education has issued a code of practice relating to placement learning which sets out guidance to higher education institutions for assuring the quality of learning derived from placements. Initial work has been done by the National Council for Work Experience (NCWE) and GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) to develop a standard for the work placements offered by GSK to chemistry undergraduates. This came into operation in Autumn 2003 and NCWE plans to build on it.

There is agreement that providing a framework to guide reflection and learning from experience is important for employability development. It is especially helpful if work-based learning experiences contain built-in, ‘real time’ reflection, guided by a framework. The record of this reflection may take the form of a learning log or reflective diary and may be part of the student’s personal development planning (PDP). A systematic review of the effectiveness of PDP for improving student learning commissioned by the Learning and Teaching Support Network’s Generic Centre (now part of the Higher Education Academy) confirmed that PDP supports the improvement of students’ academic learning and achievement (Gough et al., 2003). However, that same review noted that there was an absence of research studies addressing the power of PDP to enhance broader self-development and improved employability outcomes. The research team was therefore unable to substantiate claims made for PDP in relation to these aspects.
5. Costs of work-based learning

There is evidence that work-based learning contributes to initial employability. A relevant question is whether it is worth the costs. Consider things from employers’ perspectives. The direct costs of providing an induction and continuing supervision for a student on a work placement are often cited (Harvey et al., 1998; Burroughs, 2002) as barriers that prevent organisations – particularly small organisations – offering work placement opportunities in the first place. This is particularly the case where the student is not being brought into the organisation to undertake a specific targeted piece of work or project that otherwise would not be undertaken.

Few higher education institutions have good data on activity costs. The recently-completed HEFCEcommissioned study into the costs of different modes of off-campus delivery of higher education (including sandwich placements and workplace learning) found that most of these modes were more resource intensive (and hence costs were higher) than conventional delivery in the same subjects (JM Consulting, 2003). Much of the extra resource was made up of academic staff time. However, it is difficult to use measures such as comparative costs when the ‘conventional’ delivery mode for a particular subject is designed at the outset (for sound pedagogic reasons) to incorporate planned work experience elements.教育性上，有些会认为某些学士学位的知识、技能和特质只能在工作基础上的学习中发展。因此，比较这些成本时需要谨慎。

6. Conclusions

1. Work-based learning improves initial employability.
2. It can be organised and delivered in a variety of ways.
3. Care needs to be taken, when choosing an approach to work-based learning, not to disadvantage some groups of students inadvertently.
4. The provision of work experience or work placements is no guarantee of good quality work-based learning.
5. Seven conditions need to be met if good quality work-based learning is to result from work placements.
6. There needs to be greater expertise in modern approaches to curriculum design if work-based learning is to live up to its potential.
7. There are assessment issues to be resolved if work-based learning is to live up to its potential.
8. It remains to be seen whether alternative investments would give a better return to employers, higher education institutions and students than work placements do. Any analysis of the issue needs to take into account how the different parties to work-based learning view ‘investments’ and ‘returns’.
References


Employability and work-based learning


Harvey, L. and contributors (2003) *Transitions from higher education to work.* Centre for Research and Evaluation, Sheffield Hallam University. Available at [www.heacademy.ac.uk/2604.htm](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/2604.htm)


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and Higher Education.


Other websites of interest

- [www.services.ex.ac.uk/cas/employability/iwe/index.shtml](http://www.services.ex.ac.uk/cas/employability/iwe/index.shtml) (accessed 24 March 2006)

- [www.natdisteam.ac.uk](http://www.natdisteam.ac.uk)

- [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/foundationdegree/overview/foundation_overview.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/foundationdegree/overview/foundation_overview.asp) (accessed 24 March 2006)

- [www.skill.org.uk](http://www.skill.org.uk)

- [www.work-experience.org.uk](http://www.work-experience.org.uk)
Notes

1. See, for example, Context work developed at Leeds University: School of Geography: *What are Context Materials?* [www.geog.leeds.ac.uk/courses/other/casestudies/](http://www.geog.leeds.ac.uk/courses/other/casestudies/) (accessed 24 March 2006).


Further information including an online database of Context cases can be found at: [www.heacademy.ac.uk/employability](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/employability)

2. Voluntary work should, at appropriate points, be included under this heading.

3. Interviews conducted as part of the Skills plus project produced similar reactions (see Knight and Yorke 2004, Chapter 4).

4. This draws heavily on Harvey's (2003) *Transitions from higher education to work*.

5. Although many courses include academic projects which help develop research and presentation skills, these should be distinguished from ‘live’ employer-linked projects, which are less common. The latter involve students working directly on a project of concern to an employer. These may be undertaken during a period of work experience and subsumed in the work-experience learning or can be used as a substitute for a work-experience placement.

6. The UK’s Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education’s code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education includes a separate code of practice (section 9) relating to placement learning: this can be accessed via [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section9/default.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section9/default.asp)

7. An EC-funded project funded under the Leonardo da Vinci programme, entitled *The European Framework for Work Experience* (EFWE) aims to develop a European standard for assessing and accrediting employability skills developed through work experience.
Employability and work-based learning
Enhancing Student Employability

There are many definitions of what it is to be ‘employable’ and views on the processes that develop this attribute. The Learning and Employability Series offers a wide range of perspectives on the employability of graduates, based on the premise that, in higher education, ‘employability’ is about good learning.

One of many definitions of employability is:

‘A set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupation(s) to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.’

ESECT was an initiative to support the higher education sector in its efforts to develop highly skilled, employable graduates who can contribute effectively to national prosperity in the 21st century.

ESECT consisted of individuals with extensive experience of employability issues. The team comprised representatives of stakeholder organisations including the National Union of Students (NUS), the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), the Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA) and the Higher Education Academy. It drew on the expertise of key researchers and practitioners in the field including Professor Peter Knight, Professor Lee Harvey, Brenda Little and Professor Mantz Yorke.

ESECT was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England between October 2002 and February 2005.

The Higher Education Academy is progressing the work to enhance the employability of graduates developed in partnership with ESECT.

To find out more visit the Higher Education Academy Employability web pages:

www.heacademy.ac.uk/employability.htm
Higher education institutions are coming under increasing pressure to ensure their graduates have relevant employability skills. Institutions are also being encouraged to help students develop enterprise skills so that more graduates have the confidence and knowledge to set up businesses.

Senior managers and academics are looking for support at all levels to embed employability and enterprise into the higher education experience.

The Higher Education Academy is committed to helping institutions improve the employability and entrepreneurship of all students. The Academy has worked with a number of partners to provide a range of tools and resources in these areas.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT) to help the sector engage with the employability policy. Its work began in September 2002 and finished at the end of February 2005.

ESECT dovetailed its plans with those of the Academy to provide a one-stop-shop on employability matters. The priority was to strengthen links with others committed to enhancing student employability.