



Improving Employability for Industrial Placements: Challenges, Approaches and Recommendations

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Abstract:

Industrial placements can play a key role in developing an individual undergraduate's softer skills, giving the opportunity for experiential learning, which is often sought by employers when selecting future employees. The combination of good academic achievement and the demonstration of broader skills developed in a varied work place environment where responsibility, collaboration and teamwork have been practiced and developed over time are highly appreciated by employers. This article reviews current student industrial placement activity in the United Kingdom, a typical recruitment process and the implications for stakeholders.

Keywords: Employability, Student, Placements, Intern, Industrial placements, Higher education

1. Introduction and Objectives

Many directors in the UK believe that the educational system can do more to prepare young people for work, particularly concerning employability skills (Higgins, 2008). These skills are needed by large corporates, public sector and the small- to medium-size enterprise sector which comprises 99.8% of the 4 million active businesses in the UK, employing some 28% of the graduate output (2003 data from, Universities UK 2006).

A skilled workforce is a clear driver of prosperity (Leitch, 2006), enabling innovation, greater utilisation of technologies and techniques to improve efficiency and effectiveness. Whilst these needs are recognised the levels of interaction between the Higher Education sector and external organisations who recruit can be very variable at a local and national level. Student placements represent one way in which a productive and valuable relationship can be built. Occasionally, these interactions lead to stronger and longer term links which might include research projects, speaker engagements and the utilisation of services and facilities.

It is widely recognised that the relationship between student employment and higher education is affected by a large number of factors, making detailed analysis from the available statistics and data challenging for those involved in this field (HEFCE, 2002). Little (2006) highlighted that it is the learning an individual derives from work experience that is important. The experience itself is not necessarily intrinsically

beneficial to the student involved. Mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that learning is reviewed and reflected upon by the student.

This review article summarises the current literature and attempts to explore how current processes may be improved to strengthen links between Universities and employers, improving employability and the opportunities for personal development for undergraduates.

The objectives of this article may be summarised as:

- A review of the current literature available on UK placement activity and the selection processes which may be involved
- A summary of a generic recruitment process for placement students highlighting differentiating factors for applicants
- Recommendations for:
 - Universities, Departments and Placement Officers
 - Undergraduates seeking to improve their employability.

2. Context

The UNITE student experience survey (Unite, 2006) showed that 59% (n= 1 025) of students go to university to improve their chances of getting a job and 22% directly identified the use of placements as a way to prepare themselves at university for a future career.

A survey by Little and Harvey (Little and Harvey, 2006) of 82 placement students who had recently returned from work placements identified three broad clusters of skills that the students felt had been positively impacted by the experience, see Figure1.

Given current competitiveness and need to differentiate oneself over other candidates within a selection process the experience gained in a placement can provide a rich set of examples for reference and exploration.

The complex nature of the links between higher education and business have been explored by Ellis and Moon (1998). Their research highlighted the value of placements as a learning experience for students and noted the existence of what they termed a 'buyer / seller relationship' where a recruiting organisation will consider the quality of the placement service and the individual students who apply. Employers frequently used a small number of local institutions from which to source their placements.

Little and Harvey (2006) showed that 11% of UK undergraduates in full time education were involved in some type of placement or sandwich activity, representing some 106 000 students.

Number of Students

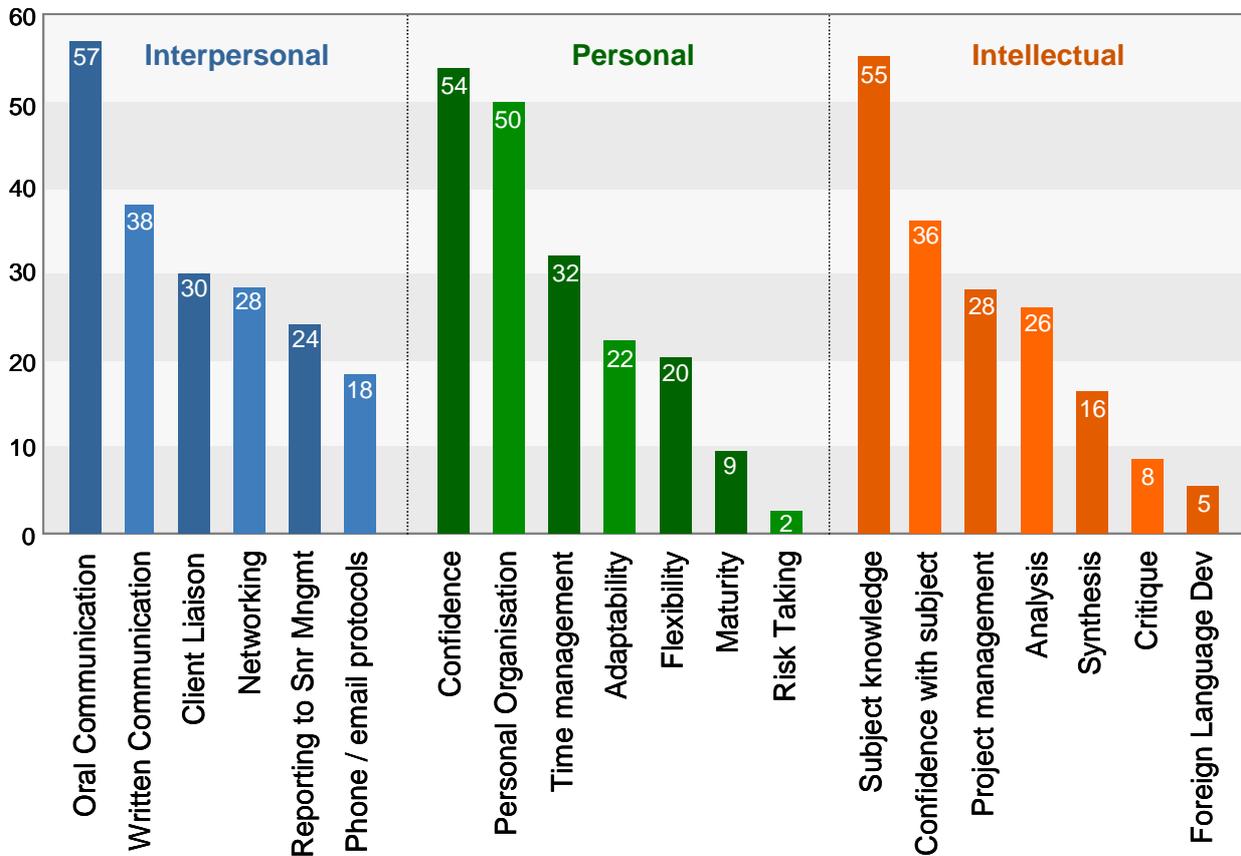


Figure 1: Interpersonal, personal and intellectual skills developed, by number of students citing such development (Little and Harvey, 2006).

Increasingly, with a high percentage of graduates obtaining a first or upper second class degree the need for employers to utilise other distinguishing factors to identify future employees has been reinforced (1994Group(i), 2007). The 1994 Group of universities (1994Group (ii), 2007) recognises the need for students to achieve good academic standards in addition to developing a portfolio of experiences and life skills, which are applicable and desirable in the workplace. The non-academic activities of many students will clearly impact their future employability for placements and more permanent positions after graduation.

The Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) has analysed data from the UK, examining the link between work experience gained during higher education and experience within the labour market post graduation. A postal survey carried out in autumn 1998, achieved a response rate of 34% and provided a database of 3 461 UK (weighted) graduates. The data indicated that fewer than one in five graduates had no work experience during higher education. Two in five had undertaken work experience not related to their studies, and a similar number had gained study related work experience. With the continued increase in educational related expenses facing students, and the diminishing level of grant available to them, it seems highly likely that the number of students doing some form of work during their course or in vacations will have increased since this data was collected. This is supported by more recent reviews which note increasing numbers of full time

students working during term time (Little, 2006). The overall findings of the work by CHERI indicated that work experience related to study had a positive effect on employment outcomes.

3. The Recruitment Process

Recruitment of the right staff at all levels in an organisation is critical given that employees represent a cost of 36% of a typical companies revenue (CFO / Mercer, 2003). This cost ensures that the majority of organisations will adopt a rigorous and appropriate selection process for employees. Whilst placement students may often be in the lower salary bracket within an organisation some of the same processes will often be applied to selection.

The recruitment of placement students enables an employer to test the market and identify potential future talent. Additionally the acquisition of skilled individuals to contribute to ongoing activities within the organisation can be an important and valued driver. However, the challenges of re-recruiting staff every twelve months, and the necessary investment required to do this should not be under estimated. This can adversely impact delivery of other team members involved in such processes. Very little consistency can currently be observed in the induction and monitoring processes for a typical placement.

Table 1 describes a typical six stage recruitment process that may be used by an organisation seeking industrial placement students. Typically the job specification would start in August and the recruitment would close in April or May for a July start.

During the pre-screen of a candidate a positive view will be taken of candidates who have specific experience (not necessarily from work) of the role and its component tasks. Academic merit will be recognised but judged carefully alongside other experiences and examples described on the application or curriculum vitae.

During stage one selection the factors which led to the successful pre-screen will be explored in detail, comparing against the responses from other candidates. At this stage the interview candidates will be selected and compared for appropriateness and potential for the role advertised.

Stage two selection will frequently involve a much more in-depth exploration of the curriculum vitae with the candidate present and in some case the use of behavioural interviewing techniques or other methods to explore the potential of the individual. Their ability to learn quickly, reflect, adapt and interact with others across hierarchical levels are often seen as positive indicators.

The typical numbers going through each stage are variable and in part will be dependant on the level of promotion and marketing that has taken place to make details of the placement widely available. Some roles may also be more attractive to potential applicants than others so great care must be taken in creating an appropriate job specification and associated job description. The extent to which certain degree disciplines or institutions are targeted will also potentially diminish or increase the number of applicants. Employers should not be overly prescriptive since they risk reducing viable applicants. The increasing number of diverse modular degree programmes may make the targeting of a particular degree discipline inappropriate.

Job Specification	Advertise	Pre Screen	Stage One Selection	Stage Two Selection	Offer
Confirm demand and permission to recruit	Determine whether the targeting of specific courses of institutions is appropriate	First review of applicants removing any who do not meet the criteria identified at start	Competitive review of candidates based on submitted applications	Verification of applicant details and experience	Offer made
Define behaviours and knowledge required to perform role and set minimum requirements	Determine the channels available to advertise role both formal and informal	Reject unsuitable candidates	Evidence of specific and relevant experience taken into account	Competitive behavioural interview	References checked
Define role parameters, benefits, location, start and end dates	Develop and approve required assets for online and offline deployment		Phone interview for candidates whom are borderline		Unsuccessful candidates rejected and offered feedback
Write and agree specification	Define process to handle adhoc enquiries				
	Schedule advertising and appropriate points to review applicant numbers and quality				
	Deploy materials				

Table 1. A generic recruitment process for placement students, the cycle starting in July / August and completing in April / May (Reid, 2008)

A number of interview techniques may be used for final selection of candidates. A technique known as behavioural interviewing was developed in the late 1970's (Bowers and Kleiner, 2005). Candidates being interviewed in this way for the first time may be unprepared for the style of questions and can struggle with giving comprehensive and complete answers (Whitacre, 2007).

A behavioural interview will consist of a number of questions allowing the candidate to explain how they handled situations they have experienced in the past. The key principle of the technique is that the candidates past behaviour is a guide as to how they may react in the future in similar circumstances. Employers surveyed (Barclay, 2001) cited a number of benefits of using this technique including:

- Better quality of information gathered
- More fairness / objectivity / consistency
- Better decisions made.

The author has found this technique to be of value and accurate in assessing potential.

Table 2 describes a generic behavioural interview process in terms of how the candidate may choose to answer and how the interviewer would assess the answers and descriptions given at the different stages.

Candidates that have a wide range of experience within and beyond the academic environment are often better equipped to answer broad questions, which will probe past experiences and activities. The best candidates will describe the different elements of the situation in a logical manner using clear vocabulary that illustrates a high level of understanding of both the task and its potential impact on others. They'll also demonstrate the ability to be able to operate at different levels using varying degrees of influencing, research and reflection on their activity. Evidence of the more traditional softer skills may be identified in the examples and these will be noted by the interviewer.

Good preparation and the ability of a candidate to articulate a given situation encompassing the elements the interviewer may be looking for (see Table 2) will lead to a high rating of the candidate. Practice and preparation facilitated by the institutions careers service is often overlooked by candidates and can enhance the performance at interview and the earlier stages of the process.

The importance of the performance during an interview versus the academic achievements to date will vary from role to role. High academic performance and relatively poor interview performance may be more acceptable in situations where a specific technical skill set is needed in a role. More people orientated roles are likely to need a good interview by the candidate, in terms of verbal communication and expression. Each individual role will generally have a base level of ability associated with it. On occasions a decision not to recruit may be taken if the calibre of the candidates is found to be lacking in some way.

Candidate:			
Description of situation and context	Description of the task, its complexity and the outcomes desired	Description of what the candidate did to achieve or exceed the outcomes	Description of outcomes, impact of outcomes on interviewee and others
SITUATION	TASK	ACTION	RESULT
Interviewer:			
Ability to articulate situation with suitable vocabulary and understanding of its complexity	Clear understanding of scale of task, resources needed, measures and feedback which may be utilised	Evidence of proactive engagement	Ability to reflect, diagnose and modify behaviour
Evidence of information gathering and processing	Ability to estimate resources and skills required to complete and deliver	Evidence of dealing with complex task in appropriate way, prioritising and building	Ability to assess direct and indirect impacts of project
Ability to research and explore	Ability to identify improvements which might be made to enhance outcomes	Ability to identify and utilise resources and information	Ability to deliver beyond expectation
Ability to understand risk and contextualise it	Ability to understand and articulate the impact on others	Ability to identify novel approaches, test and deploy if appropriate	
		Ability to differentiate between own actions and accountabilities and those of others	
		Ability to respond effectively to challenges encountered	
		Ability to work across multiple levels of hierarchy	
		Ability to influence or manage other resources with appropriate mitigations	
		Ability to learn and acquire new skills / experience	

Table 2: A typical behavioural interview structure, with example positive scoring attributes the interviewer may look for (Reid, 2008)

4. Recommendations

The literature reviewed and the author's experience suggest the following:

Recommendations for the higher education sector:

- should more proactively manage their placement activity and work to identify future employer demand for both skills and placements across all sectors including small- to medium-sized enterprises, which can represent a significant destination for graduates. Ellis and Moon (1998) have highlighted the need to foster direct relationships over time. The use of third parties by either the University or the employer would weaken this potential linkage and should be discouraged.
- should encourage the development of a portfolio and experiences within the undergraduate population which can act as a base to effectively demonstrate the softer skills typically sought by interviewers. These experiences should not be confined to academic activity as recognised by the 1994Group (2007).
- should make more information available to students about the typical employability skills they need to develop during their course, and seek to integrate opportunities where these skills might be integrated into the courses being delivered.
- should work with employers to ensure learnings from placements are reviewed to maximise the benefit as recommended by Little (2006). This will help the student to assimilate and develop the skills acquired.
- should work with employers to give early visibility of the options available to gain relevant work experience and have clearly defined contact points who can provide advice on promotion of such opportunities or the development of new ones which may arise.
- should ensure that simple processes for the advertising, on boarding and subsequent management of placements are simple and effective.

Recommendations for students seeking to improve their employability:

- should develop both an academic and non academic portfolio of experiences which will enable a rich set of examples to be shared with employers during a selection process, particularly if these support and demonstrate the capabilities being sought by the employer.
- should proactively seek out work experience opportunities in the sector in which they wish to consider a longer term career. Appropriate work experience in a voluntary capacity is equally as valuable.
- should not overlook the opportunity for personal development in activities beyond the academic related ones made available to them during their time at the institution.

In summary the author believes that placement opportunities have yet to be fully exploited by the higher education sector in attracting students and developing employability skills within the undergraduate student population in the UK. Whilst this is one factor amongst many that may contribute, it may act as a catalyst to further valuable interaction between the employer and the institution.

Disclaimer

The views contained within this article are those of the author, and may not represent the views or policies of any institution, company or organisation associated to the author.

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