

WORK PLACEMENTS AND DEGREE PERFORMANCE: DO PLACEMENTS LEAD TO BETTER MARKS OR DO BETTER STUDENTS DO PLACEMENTS? HOW CAN WE INCORPORATE FINDINGS INTO WIDER PRACTICE?

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Overview of the issue

Over recent years there has been a strong move to make UK degrees more applicable to the world of work and to include work placements as an integral part of a degree programme is one way of achieving this. Many universities, particularly in professional and professionally-related disciplines, have incorporated such kinds of work experience for some years, although there is evidence of a decline in placements (Little and Harvey 2007, Blake and Summers 2007). More recently the work placement has again been under scrutiny in the UK as such activity becomes central to government policies (Higher Ambitions 2009).

Studies suggest that there is a causal link between improvement in employability and academic achievement after completing an integrated work placement (Arnold and Garland 1990). There are two main assumptions about the efficacy of such work experience. The first is that placements make you more employable. The second is that placements improve the final quality (class) of degree. Evidence to support the former premise has been actively researched and the case has been strongly supported by a number of studies (e.g. Hadfield 2007 and Phillips 2007).

Summary

This work builds on earlier research which shows that undertaking a work placement year improves students' degree results (Driffield et al, 2011). This project, which is funded by the Higher Education Academy, has three main aims:

- To reproduced the original research across a wider group of students, in another institution and more subject areas, in order to test the validity and generalisability of the findings across the sector as a whole.
- To explore, in more depth via student engagement, the key findings of the original research in relation to those groups which would benefit most from the findings (e.g. less academically strong students and those choosing not to undertake a placement).
- To provide some advice and guidance to policy makers in HEIs to inform their decisions around designing and implementing placement programmes.

We have currently completed Strand 1 of the project (quantitative) which has expanded the data across disciplines and institutions. All of the key milestones have been completed to plan. Data has been collected on two cohorts of students from Aston University and Ulster University's Business School to answer the three original questions set for this stage of the project. These were:

- Does undertaking an integrated work placement improve your degree classification?
- Do the 'better' students do a placement?
- Do the 'better' students gain more from a placement in terms of degree classification?

The data has been assimilated into two separate datasets and econometric estimation has been completed. The results have been written up and a first full draft of the paper that reports our quantitative findings will be completed shortly.

Milestones

We are currently ahead of schedule. A large database of 5,700 students has been developed from Aston's student information System (SITS). This was completed at the end of October. The Ulster data took more time to construct because three data sources had to be linked. This was completed during mid-November and includes information about 730 Ulster Business School students.

Data analysis for Aston began in early November and initial results were discussed between the team. This enabled us to think clearly about how to do the analysis for Ulster. Once the Ulster data had been finished it was possible to construct a comprehensive set of results for both Aston and Ulster

We currently have a draft working paper that includes a methodological section, data section and a results section.

There is one theoretical change to our original project plan. We have decided to use the term 'engaged' student instead of the term 'good' student. This is because we have now included a variable that is a better measure of engagement. The pilot project did not include this. We believe that this adds an additional dimension to the study.

Findings

A number of significant outputs have already been achieved:

1. We find that 'engaged' students are more likely to choose to do a placement.
2. In contrast to the pilot study, we find that the self-selection term is irrelevant. Engaged students choose to do placements but it does not matter whether you are 'engaged' or not. If a student does a placement they improve their performance in finals by approximately 5%.
3. All of the results are statistically significant.
4. The result is remarkably robust across both Aston and Ulster.
5. The result holds separately across Aston's Schools and a range of discipline areas. This is a positive finding which will help us to make some clear recommendations for the whole sector.
6. We find that out of the students who choose to do a placement, students who have a pre-placement year average of less than 60% benefit more from a placement compared to students with an average greater than 60%. This suggests that placements make students more engaged.
7. We find that better quality placements improve performance in their finals.

Impact

We have not entered the dissemination phase of this project yet, but it is already having implications for Aston (the original institution) and the wider community (via Ulster).

At Aston we have reorganised our support to placement students in order to increase the uptake of placements, particularly from under-represented groups. The original pilot research was in the area of Business and Management where we have a track record of placing large numbers of students in placement companies. This research has provided us with some data which encourages us to see that the patterns for Business and Management are similar to those in other disciplines. In doing this we have created a new set of KPIs for the placements team and in doing this we have used the initial findings on this project.

The next impact of this Strand 1 is to inform the second Strand of the project (qualitative). We will now try to explain some of the initial findings. Focus groups will be used as they rely on the interaction of participants in the group to bring out views without the intervention of the researcher. The focus groups will be held both at Ulster and Aston. These are being run by Jane Andrews and are being conducted this term. She has now developed the focus group protocol.

Dissemination

The dissemination phase was planned to commence in May 2012, but we have already started this work.

- Initial sector-wide dissemination by a presentation of the pilot work and proposals for the wider research was given at the Association of Sandwich Education and Training (ASET) annual conference in September.
- As seen in the previous section, we have already been influencing practice internally.
- We have submitted a paper to the Higher Education Academy national conference
- We are preparing a paper for the Academy of Management: Learning and Teaching journal (4*)

Issues and Challenges

Currently there have been no issues and challenges.

There have, however, been some unexpected advantages of the research project. These have included:

- Bringing together new colleagues to collaborate together
- Making links between researchers across institutions who had not met before
- Bringing together quantitative and qualitative researchers
- Producing some publishable research data before we had planned
- Our work has been show cased in the soon to be released Wilson Review on HEI/Business collaboration.

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