

MISLEM – PILOT STUDY, INTERMIN REPORT

Dr Jane Andrews*

Dr Helen Higson

Research Centre for Higher Education,
Learning and Management, Aston
Business School, Aston University

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All enquiries to Jane Andrews, HELM, MB621, Aston University.

J.e.andrews1@aston.ac.uk

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Introduction

The MISLEM project is funded by the European Union under the auspices of the 'Leonardo Programme'. Its primary aim is to evaluate and analyse business graduate employability in relation to the quality of undergraduate level business and management education within the wider European area. It is anticipated that one of the major outcomes of the project will be the formulation of a set of 'generic' key *meta* business skills and competencies that will be applicable throughout EU business schools.

Part of the project involves analysing the value of work-based learning programmes including formal work-placements in the UK. Such work-placements, which refer to formally organised programmes in which students undertake a period of educational work-based learning, form an important part of the curriculum at Aston University and are highly valued for the contribution they make in enhancing graduate employability. This report describes and discusses the analysis of Aston Business School's placement programme. It describes the students' perspectives in relation to their work-placement experiences and discusses the usefulness of the skills and knowledge acquired in the first two years of undergraduate education to the work-placement situation. It also draws attention to a set of 'generic' skills and competencies developed by students whilst on placement.

The report concludes by noting that the work-placement programme is an integral part of Aston Universities Business School's Portfolio which, by offering undergraduates the opportunity to develop and grow academically, vocationally and personally, is one of Aston's premier assets.

Literature

The value of work-placements in providing students with the opportunity to enhance and develop skills and knowledge acquired at university is reflected in the literature (Ellis, 2000; Robinson, 2000; Quinn, 2004). Whilst there is little doubt that *good* work-placements can constitute an important learning experience for students, some authors argue that employers also benefit as placement students make a significant contribution both to the organisations in which they are placed and to industry as a whole (Stokes, 1993; Ellis, 2000). Others point to the usefulness of work-placements as a positive indicator of employability (Robinson, 2000; Siebert et al, 2002), arguing that vocational placements enable students to build upon core subject discipline-focused knowledge and skills whilst providing the ideal setting in which students are able to acquire *softer* transferable interpersonal, communication and self-management skills desired by employers (Fry, 2001; Harvey & Knight, 2005; Gribben, 2006).

Simply put, work-placements ultimately enhance graduate employability by preparing students for the world of work (Hartog & Frame, 2004; Rayfield, 2005; Tysome, 2006). However, one of the most important factors determining the success of such programmes is the level of academic support available for students whilst on placement (Robinson 2000; Neill & Mulholland, 2003). The role played by academics in supporting undergraduates to develop and enhance their own employability is discussed by Harvey & Knight (2005) who suggest that within the higher educational environment academics and academic institutions have a responsibility to promote student employability by encouraging students to develop ‘softer’ transferable skills such as *flexibility, risk-taking, self-management and interpersonal skills* (p.8).

Accredited work-placements, integrated into the curriculum under the auspices of ‘Sandwich-Courses’ are offered at 29 UK Higher Education Institutions which between them offer 281 different courses (UCAS, 2006). Whilst many of these institutions only offer one or two Sandwich Courses, six (including Aston), have a successful history of offering work-placements as part of Undergraduate Degree Programmes. This history is reflected by long-established links with industry and high rates of graduate employment (MacLeod, 2003).

Whilst the benefits of work-placements for both students and employers appear to be wide-reaching, there is little empirical evidence to support this contention. It is anticipated that by drawing attention to student perspectives and experiences of their work-placement this report will contribute to debates in this area.

Methodology

Out of a sample of 250 third-year undergraduate business and management placement students, 25 were selected using *random* sampling techniques and surveyed by e-mail about their experiences of undertaking a work-placement as part of their undergraduate courses. The main advantage of using random survey techniques was that they provided the ideal research tool with which to capture the views of students from all of the business and management undergraduate programmes offered at Aston University. Moreover, by using random sampling techniques each of the placement students had an equal chance of being selected to take part in the survey thereby increasing the representativeness of the sample (May, 1993; Robson, 2003).

The surveys, which followed mixed methodological approaches, included questions about various aspects of the students' placement experiences. This report provides a brief overview of the students' perspectives and experiences.

Perceptions of Aston University and the 'Work-placement' Experience

The study participants represented the whole range of undergraduate programmes offered by Aston Business School including Combined Honours (Bachelors Degrees in which students study two separate, unrelated subject areas). Of the twenty-five completing the questionnaire, 23 (92%) were either *satisfied* or *very satisfied* with the education they had received thus far at Aston; the other two were neither satisfied or dissatisfied.

The students were employed in a wide variety of placement occupations in various sectors of the economy; 13 (52%) were in the private sector; 6 (24%) in the public sector; 2 (4%) in the voluntary sector; 4 (16%) declined to answer. The vast majority of the students were either satisfied or very satisfied with their placement (23, 92%).

Of the remaining 2 individuals, one individual was *dissatisfied* and one *very dissatisfied* with their placement.

The students' placement work activities varied greatly; the most frequently reported activity, regularly undertaken by 19 (76%) of the participants was report writing. Low level administrative duties represented the second most frequently undertaken activity with 16 (64%) of the participants indicating that a significant amount of their time was taken up with general office work including filing and answering e-mail, postal and telephone enquiries. Other everyday work related activities regularly undertaken whilst on work-placement included arranging and attending meeting (11, 44% of the participants); *low-level* electronic working , using the internet, inputting data into data-bases etc (11, 44%) ; interacting with customers (10, 40%); *technical* ICT related maintenance and programming work (9, 36%). Around a third, (8, 32%), of the students indicated that they regularly undertook managerial level tasks such as office leadership, teaching and training or project management. More infrequent activities included travelling overseas (1, 4% of the participants); attending corporate events (1, 4%); arranging corporate hospitality, (1, 4%); financial accounting, (1, 4%); and creative thinking (1, 4%).

For the majority of the students, the fact that they were studying at Aston University was a significant factor taken into account by their placement employers at the time of recruitment (21, 84%). Having been appointed, 9 (36%), of the students believed that they were given the opportunity to fully utilise the business related knowledge, skills and competencies acquired in the first two years of their university education during their placement experiences. However, 23 (92%), indicated that the *softer* skills acquired at university (interpersonal and communication) proved most useful during the course of their placement.

Preparation for the Placement

The students were asked to identify what skills & competencies they felt should have been delivered as part of their formative undergraduate education prior to commencement of the work-placement. The majority (20, 80%) felt that their undergraduate studies should have prepared them better for the placement by offering

them the opportunity to improve further their general written and verbal communication skills. This included presentation skills, report writing skills and electronic writing skills – which were noted as being particularly problematic by several of the students (e-mail etiquette). Other areas identified as being somewhat lacking by the majority of the students included strategic management and organisational skills – the ability to think, plan and act strategically within a work setting (13, 54% of the students felt this was an area in which they lacked the appropriate level of skill). Leadership skills were also identified by the students as an area where they could have been better prepared during the first two years of their degree (8, 36%). Notably, only 1 student felt that their degree should have equipped them with greater business knowledge whilst another single student identified *business acumen* as an area in which they lacked the necessary level of skill.

Having identified the areas in which the students felt they could have been better prepared for their placement, they were then asked to describe what key changes to undergraduate education they believed would improve their placement experiences. Most of the students declined to answer this question; however, 6 (24%) felt their courses should have included more lectures from actual business managers and entrepreneurs whilst 12 (48%) commented about student numbers and the lack of opportunity for discussion in lectures.

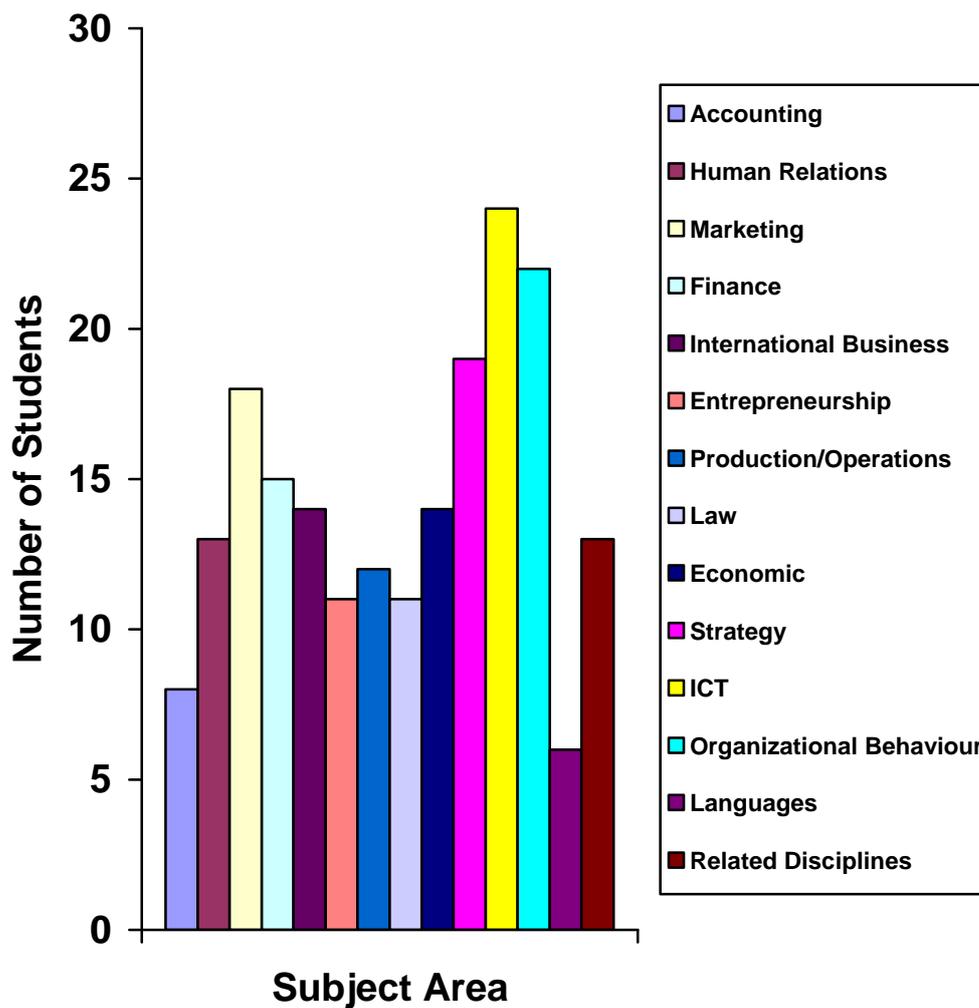
The ‘business game’, which is a second year module in which students are required to work in teams to manage a virtual business, was identified by the majority of the students as being particularly valuable in preparing the students for their work-placement (20, 80%). In addition to this other ‘real-life’ teaching and learning techniques such as the use of case-studies and tutorials based upon contemporary events were also identified as being particularly useful in preparing the students’ for their placements (16, 64%).

Discipline specific knowledge and skills

The students were asked about their perceptions and experiences of fourteen different business and management related disciplines; accounting; human resources; marketing; finance; international business; entrepreneurship; production/operations;

law; economics; strategy; information and communication technology; organizational behaviour; languages; related disciplines including sociology and psychology of business. Figure 1, below, depicts the students' perceptions of the usefulness of discipline specific business knowledge in respect of their placement experiences.

Figure 1: Usefulness of Subject Disciplines to Placement



The study suggests that ICT skills are valued the most highly and utilised the most widely by placement students (24, 96%). Other areas identified by at least 70% of the students as being useful whilst on placement included; organizational behaviour (22, 88%) and business strategy (19, 76%). The subject areas perceived by the least number of students to be useful whilst on placement included languages (6, 24%) and accounting (8, 32%). Less than half of the students indicated that skills grounded in

entrepreneurship, productions/operations management and law were useful whilst on placement.

- **Understanding, business knowledge & skills**

On the whole the students believed that they had high levels of understanding in all the business areas taught at Aston University. The exceptions to this were entrepreneurship, productions/operations management and marketing which were identified by around 25% of the students as being areas in which they had limited understanding.

In addition to questions focusing on the usefulness of discipline focused subject knowledge, the students were also asked about how relevant they believe an understanding of discipline specific concepts and theories will be to their future career plans. Figure 2 shows the students' perceptions of how important they feel it is for them to have a full understanding of the various business concepts and theories in regards to their future career plans.

Figure 2: The Importance of Understanding Business Concepts in Relation to Future Career Plans



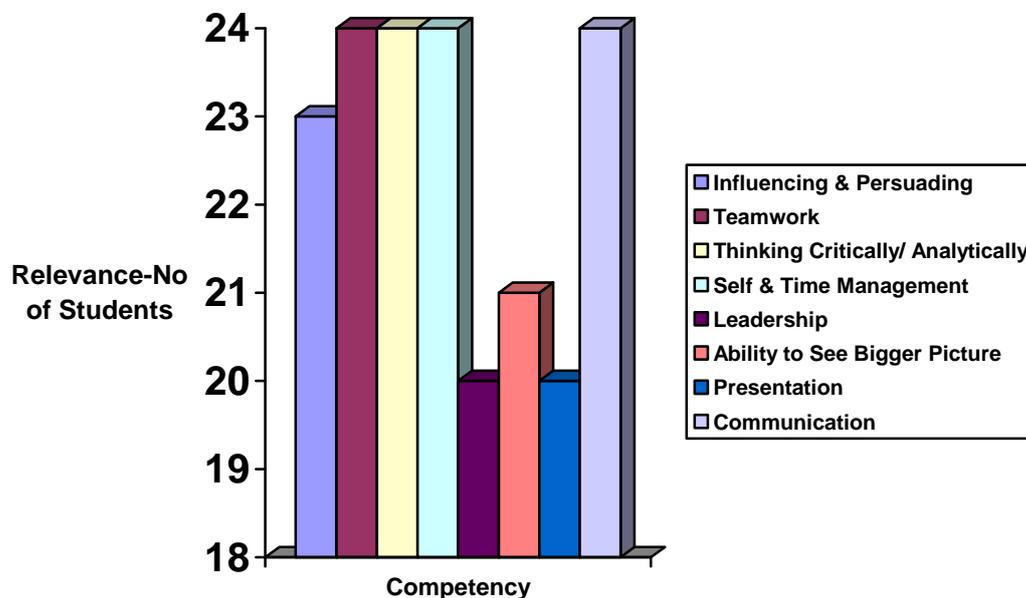
Figure 2 reveals that at least half of the students believe that, with the exception of foreign language ability and accounting skills, all of the business knowledge acquired at University will be useful in the future. This was particularly the case for ICT and Organizational Behaviour (24, 96%) and International Business (23, 92%).

Generic competencies and skills

Eight generic competencies and skills were identified during an earlier *exploratory* study as being relevant to graduate employability (Andrews & Higson, 2006). These were; the ability to influence and persuade subordinates, colleagues and superiors in a work situation; the ability to work effectively in a team – including teambuilding skills; the ability to think critically and analytically; good self and time management skills; leadership abilities; the ability to see the *bigger picture*; good presentation skills; and high levels of written and oral communication skills.

Figure 3 shows the students' perceptions of the relevance of the competencies in respect of their experiences whilst on work-placement.

Figure 3: The Students' Perceptions of the Relevance of the Competencies



Of the eight generic competencies and skills, four were identified by twenty-four of the participants as being particularly relevant to their daily work routines (teamwork; thinking critically/analytically; self and time management' and communication).

Whilst the majority of the students acknowledged the importance of the generic competencies and skills in their daily work routines, their perceptions of their own ability to use such competencies varied greatly. Figure 4 below shows the students' perceived level of competency in each area and also indicates the areas where the students feel less capable.

Figure 4: Perceptions of Abilities of Using Generic Competencies

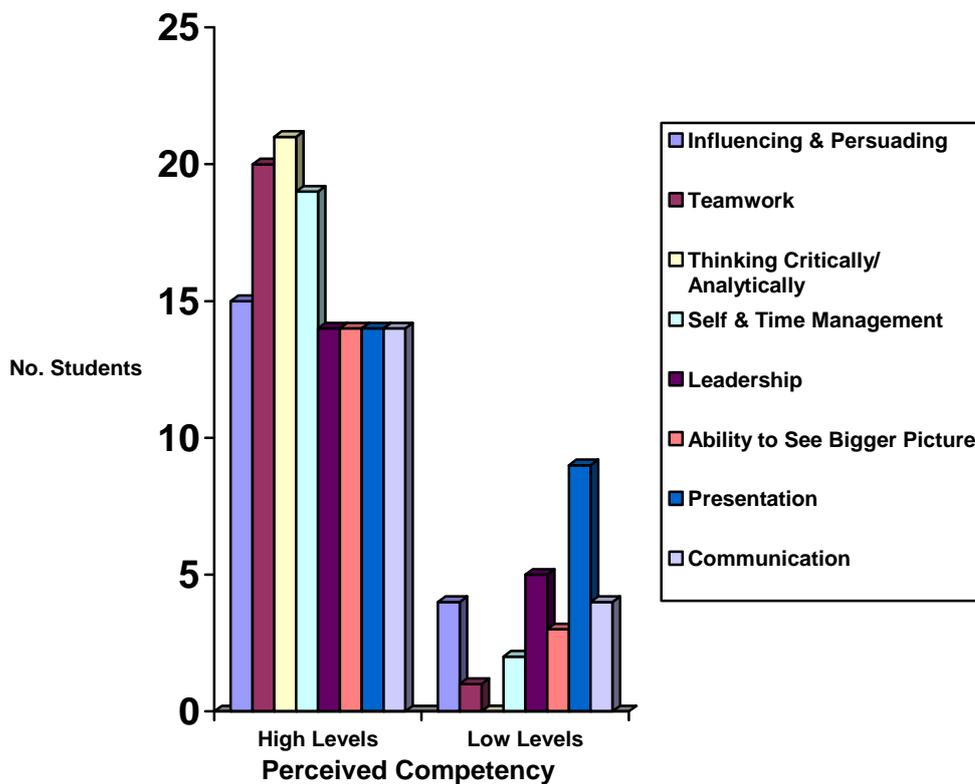
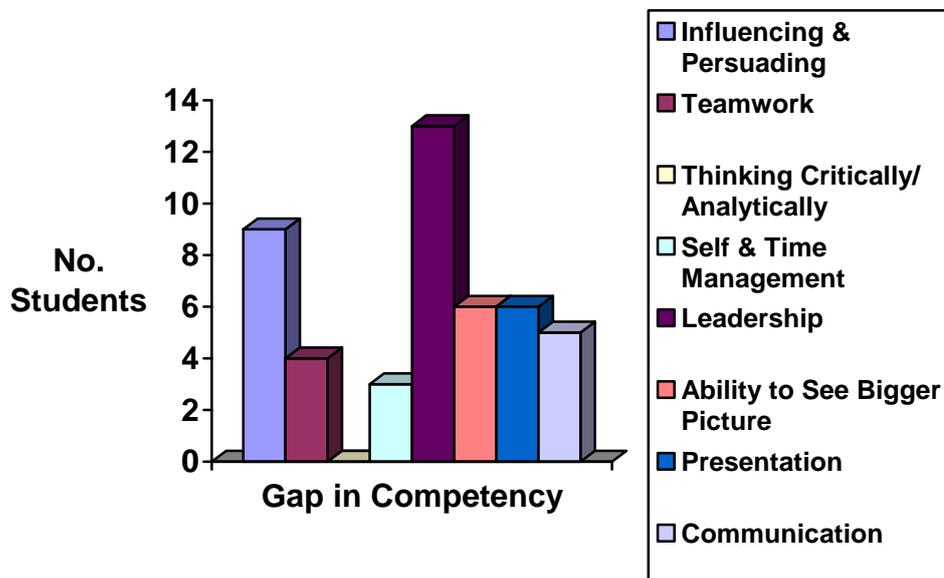


Figure 4 shows that the area in which the students felt the least capable related to presentation skills whilst the area where they felt most confident was in their ability to think critically and analytically. Whilst, on the whole, the students felt relatively confident in using the competencies they all acknowledged that, during the course of their placement experiences, they experienced times when they felt less than capable in utilising the competencies. Presentation skills were the most problematic with 8 (36%) of the students identifying problems in this area.

In addition to presentation skills, the students also perceived there to be a notable gap in their leadership abilities with 13 (52%) of the students indicating that, during their placement, they had experienced times when their leadership skills were less than adequate. Figure 5 shows the number of students reporting a 'gap' in their ability to use the generic skills whilst on placement.

Figure 5: Perceptions of a 'Gap' in Competencies.



In some respects, Figure 5 contradicts Figure 4 in that it identifies leadership as the area in which the students' perceived to be the largest 'gap' in their own abilities. Presentation skills, whilst identified by 6 of the students as being problematic, were not given the same level of attention as in the previous question.

Discussion

This study suggests that Aston Business School students are more than adequately prepared for their work-placement experience and that once on placement they have a positive and educational experience. That 92% of the students were either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with their placement would indicate that, on the whole, the placements are at an appropriate level matching the students' abilities and expectations. The wide spectrum of placement positions occupied by the students is reflective of the Business School Placement Scheme, indicating that the first two years of business focused degrees appropriately prepare undergraduates for a diverse range of placement jobs in which they are expected to be able to complete a wide range of tasks.

Despite the diversity of occupational tasks undertaken, which varied from basic administration to more complicated managerial and technological tasks, the students indicated that they had limited opportunity to fully utilise the business skills, competencies and knowledge acquired in the first two years of their education. This finding supports research into graduate employability which suggests that many graduates are under-employed in positions in which their skills and knowledge are under-used and not fully recognised by employers (Nabi, 2003).

Many of the students identified a clear gap in their general communication and presentation skills. This is despite the fact that much of the curriculum focuses on such skills, with tutorials offering students the opportunity to enhance and build upon their verbal and interpersonal skills. It is evident that students do bear some responsibility in this matter, low levels of attendance at, and participation in, tutorials does nothing to promote student learning. However, from an andragogical perspective, undergraduates are adults, responsible for their own learning (Forest & Peterson, 2006). Tutorials offer the opportunity to hone the softer skills desired by employers - it is up to individual students to decide whether or not to take up that opportunity.

One of the most significant findings related to *real-life* teaching and learning techniques such as the business game. This *game* clearly benefits the students in that

it prepares them for some of the *real-life* challenges associated with the work environment – including the problems of teamwork. It culminates with the students presenting their work to actual business managers – an experience many find daunting. Yet, it was this experience that many identified as being of the greatest relevance to their placement experiences. The other teaching and learning techniques identified in the study as being useful in preparing the students for their work-placements reflected case-study and other *real-life* learning techniques such as tutorials in which students are encouraged to analyse and discuss contemporary events. This suggests that student engagement and participation in the classroom provides valuable learning opportunities which enhances subsequent work-based learning.

The skills and competencies most utilised by the students were ICT based; this is not surprising given the fact that most contemporary office work is in electronic format and much office communication undertaken electronically. The fact that the most frequently used business skills and competencies reflected learning acquired whilst studying organizational behaviour and business strategy may reflect the students occupational position within the organizations in which they were deployed. Most conceptualised themselves as ‘trainees’ and viewed their position as being one in which they were acquiring valuable work-based skills within a learning environment. The least utilised areas of business knowledge used by the placement students were entrepreneurship, operations management and law. This may reflect the structure of the curricula – many of the students do not study these disciplines until the final year of their degree.

When asked to assess which business disciplines may prove useful in their future careers’ the students gave particular credence to international business, organizational strategy, organizational behaviour and ICT. However, with the exception of languages and accounting, all of the business disciplines included within the questionnaire were deemed to be relevant. This supports current thinking about the role played by graduates within a knowledge based economy (Harvey et al, 2002) and the value of a higher education qualifications grounded in precise, yet expansive, business knowledge and theory.

Although the students generally perceived themselves to have an adequate understanding of, and ability to use, many of the business skills and knowledge associated with specific subject areas, they were less confident in their opinions of their abilities to use the generic competencies identified in the study. Whilst all eight of the competencies were deemed relevant to the students' work-placements, the study suggests that many of them lacked confidence in their abilities to utilise such generic skills. This was particularly the case for presentation skills, leadership skills and communication skills. Whilst this finding may reflect the students' age a lack of experience within a formal work setting, it also leads to the suggestion that undergraduate education might further enhance employability by including such intangible 'softer' skills within the curriculum. Undergraduates could be encouraged to develop their own presentation and communication skills by the inclusion of assessed presentations where permitted within each module. Leadership skills may be more difficult to teach; however, UK universities generally provide students with the opportunity to become involved in a wide-range of extra-curricula sporting or voluntary activities. Such activities in themselves may promote leadership and self-confidence whilst providing the ideal medium in which students can 'grow' as individuals (Fenton et al: 1993, Liao-Troth & Dunn: 1999, Wardell et al: 2000).

Conclusion

This exploratory study has drawn attention to the benefits of undertaking a formal work-placement as part of a Bachelors Degree Programme from the perspectives of the students' themselves. It has shown how placements enhance employability by providing the opportunity for students to build upon the skills and knowledge acquired during the first two years of their degree whilst developing and acquiring 'softer' generic competencies such as communication skills. The growing 'marketisation' of the educational sector, manifested by high fees, student loans and student debt, makes the need for universities to offer *value for money* and to prepare students for success in what is an increasingly competitive graduate market extremely important. This project leads to two suggestions for further research: Firstly, further empirical studies need to be conducted in order to determine employers' perspectives of work-placement programmes and to consider how universities and employers might work together to develop new and existent programmes. Secondly, an

alternative study, examining how universities might assist undergraduate students develop 'softer' intangible leadership and communication skills could provide the empirical grounding for curricula development in this area.

In conclusion, work-placements are an integral part of Aston Universities Business School's Portfolio. By offering undergraduates the opportunity to develop and grow academically, vocationally and personally the placement scheme remains one of Aston's premier assets.

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