

**Paper Title: Entrepreneurship & Innovation Through Experience: Student & Employer Perspectives of Paid Work Placements in Promoting Entrepreneurialism.**

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**[words]**

## **Abstract**

The value of work based learning in equipping undergraduate students with the necessary skills and experiences required in the workplace is reflected in the literature (Ellis, 2000; Quinn, 2004; Robinson, 2000; Siebert et al, 2002). Few empirical studies have, however, identified the value of formal work placements in providing the opportunity for students to meet the needs of small and large organisations by gaining practical experience in an environment which promotes enterprise and entrepreneurialism. Furthermore, little is known about how work-placements enable students to build upon the entrepreneurial and enterprise skills and competencies learned in the formative years of undergraduate business and management education. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the role played by work-placements in enhancing student entrepreneurialism, enterprise skills and ultimately employability.

## **Introduction**

The unprecedented yet successful expansion of Higher Education over the past two decades (Harvey et al, 2002) is increasingly tarnished by questions about the ability of graduates to meet the needs of an ever-changing, progressively global work-place environment (Elias & Purcell, 2004). Indeed, serious concerns have been expressed about what is often perceived to be a notable 'gap' between the skills and capabilities of graduates, and the requirements and demands of industry. Whilst there is little evidence to support the existence of such a 'skills-gap', the need for HEIs to supply highly skilled, innovative and entrepreneurial graduates able to meet the continually changing demands of employers and other stakeholders cannot be ignored.

'Sandwich Courses' combining traditional classroom based lectures and tutorials with a period of formally accredited work-experience represent one method of enhancing graduate employability. Accredited work placements are available as part of undergraduate education at 29 UK Higher Education Institutions, which between them offer 281 different courses (UCAS, 2006)<sup>[1]</sup>. 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.

At Aston Business School (ABS), work-placements refer to formally organised programmes in which students undertake a period of educational work-based learning over a 48 week period. The placements, which form an important and integral part of the Business School curriculum, are compulsory for all of the School's UK based Single-Honours undergraduate business students and optional for Combined Honours students<sup>[2]</sup>. Overseas students may also elect to undertake a period of formal work-placement. The vast majority of work-placements are taken during the students' third year of study and over 650 companies regularly advertise their positions to ABS students. Whilst on placement, students are supported by a placement-tutor from the Business School in addition to being supervised by a named individual within the company in which they are employed.

Whilst the value of paid work placements in equipping undergraduate students with the necessary skills and experiences required in the workplace is reflected in the literature (Robinson, 2000; Siebert et al, 2002), few empirical studies have identified the value of placements in providing the opportunity for students to develop entrepreneurial and enterprise skills and competencies acquired in the formative years of undergraduate education. Furthermore, little is known about how placement students meet the needs of small and large organisations whilst gaining practical experience in an environment which promotes enterprise and entrepreneurialism.

## **Methodology**

The primary purpose of the study was to provide empirically based data that could be used to evaluate the Business School's work-placement programme in terms of both generic business skills and competencies and other 'softer' skills and competencies integral to the development of innovation and entrepreneurialism. It aimed to identify whether the first two years of undergraduate education adequately prepared students for the work placement and to assess the value of university 'facilitated' work-experience for both students and employers.

The study was conducted in two distinct stages; the first a detailed exploratory study of 25 placement students. The aim of the exploratory study was to identify areas of concern and good practice that could be investigated further in the second stage of the project. Out of a sample of 400 third-year undergraduate business and management placement students, e-mail questionnaires were sent to 100 students using *random* sampling techniques. Twenty-five responded to the surveys which examined in detail the students' perspectives of their individual work-placement experiences. This initial student questionnaire utilised quantitative methodology to investigate how the students were able to use the skills, competencies and knowledge acquired during the first two years of their undergraduate programme in their placement. The data gathered was analysed using simple pre-coding techniques.

The second stage of the research process comprised of a mainly qualitative postal survey sent out to 400 'placement' employers. This survey aimed to capture the employers' perspectives about the relationship between a set of generic skills and competencies and the development of entrepreneurial and innovative working practices by placement students. It also included questions about the progression and contribution made by placement students. Of the 400 questionnaires despatched, 315 replies were received (79%). The qualitative part of the employers survey was analysed using a system of 'open-coding' wherein emergent themes were identified and analysed in detail.

## **The 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 because 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).

Simply put, work-placements ultimately enhance graduate employability by preparing students for the world of work (Hartog & Frame, 2004; Rayfield, 2005; Tysome, 2006). 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).

Whilst the benefits of formal work-placements for both students and employers appear to be wide-reaching, there is little empirical evidence to support this contention. By providing a detailed discussion of the empirical data gathered during the course of our research we draw attention to students’ and employers’ perspectives and in doing so contribute to debates about the value of formal work-placements within the business school undergraduate curriculum.

## **Findings**

### **- Placement Positions & Activities**

The student sample were employed in a wide variety of placement occupations in various sectors of the economy. Their placement work activities varied greatly with the most frequently reported activity being report writing. Low level administrative duties represented the second most frequently undertaken activity with many of the students 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 meetings; *basic keyboard* work including using the internet and inputting data into data-bases; interacting with customers;

*technical* ICT related maintenance and programming work. Around a third of the students indicated that they regularly undertook managerial level tasks such as office leadership, teaching and training or project management.

**- Generic Skills & Competencies and entrepreneurialism**

Eight generic competencies and skills were identified during an earlier *exploratory* study as being relevant to graduate employability: 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 verbal communication skills (Andrews & Higson, 2006).

Although innovation and entrepreneurialism did not feature in this earlier study as desirable graduate ‘skills’, the cumulative effect of the above eight skills and competencies was conceptualised as being integral to the development of individual entrepreneurial working. Subsequently, the second questionnaire commenced by asking employers to gauge the students’ abilities in the eight competencies. Figure 1 below shows the percentage of employers rating each competency as being relevant to the development of entrepreneurialism in their students.

**Figure 1: Employers’ Perspectives of the Students Ability to Use the Competencies at the End of their Placement.**

Skill/ Competency	Percentage of Employers rating competency as being relevant to the development of entrepreneurialism.
Possession of leadership abilities	83
Ability to work as part of a team	78
Ability to see bigger picture	77
Possession of good time and self-management skills	69
Good written skills	67
Good presentation skills	67
Ability to think critically and analytically	66
Ability to influence and persuade others	58

Whilst the majority of the employer sample indicated that all of the competencies were relevant to the development of individual entrepreneurialism, the study suggests that some ‘softer’ skills are more relevant in developing entrepreneurialism whilst on work-placement environment than others. Almost all of the employers indicated that the possession of leadership abilities, team-working skills and the ability to see the bigger picture were integral to the development of entrepreneurialism. However, the ability to influence and persuade others and to think critically and analytically were deemed less important.

Possibly the most important finding emerging out of the student survey was the growth in confidence identified by the majority of students as being a natural feature of their placement experience. All of the students indicated that during the course of their placement they had grown in confidence and self-esteem – this was reflected in higher levels of individual entrepreneurialism and innovation towards the end of the placement year.

For many of the employers, the development of individual entrepreneurialism within their placement students was reflected in increased personal and professional growth:

*He developed very well through the course of the year and has taken on far more work than expected for a placement student. He has been a great asset to the team.*

[Manager: International Electronic Goods Organisation]

*He has shown great maturity and a professional approach to any task given to him... he is well on his way to acquiring all the necessary skills and personal attributes to achieve his aspirations.*

[Director: Regional Engineering Organization]

*She has progressed greatly during the year... [and now] contributes greatly to the team and the organisation. She has taken her responsibilities seriously and her performance only grew during the year.*

[Manager: EU Based ICT Organisation]

Whilst all of the eight skills and competencies previously discussed were believed to be important facets of individual entrepreneurialism, many employers identified a positive attitude towards continuous learning as important:

*He has contributed through his desire to learn and improve.  
He challenges, questions, asks why constantly but always in  
a positive and constructive matter.*

[Manager: International Multi-Media & Entertainments  
Organisation]

*[Student's] willingness to learn, hard work, dedication and social skills  
have contributed toward maintaining and exceeding our client relationship.*

[Manager: International Accountants/ Auditors]

*Her commitment, attitude and willingness to learn has been  
extremely pleasing. She has also exceeded my expectations...*

[Manager: International Accountants/ Auditors]

The comments made in respect of the students' personal and professional progression gives some indication of the value of the placement in terms of the business and management roles and responsibilities undertaken by students during the course of their placement.

Teamworking skills were identified by the majority of the employers as being integral to the development of individual entrepreneurialism and enterprise amongst the students:

*[Student] has been a valuable member of the team, always  
happy to help, prompt in the delivery of her work, keen  
to learn ... and positive throughout.*

[Manager: Public Sector Consultancy]



*[Student] is an ambitious and highly motivated team player...*

[Manager: International ICT Organisation]

*He was quick to learn, showed plenty of initiative and quickly became a 'team player'.*

[Manager: National Health Service: UK]

Some managers drew attention to the manner in which individual placement students had become 'valuable assets' to their organisations:

*[Student] was an asset to us who was always willing to take on additional responsibilities and to also help new member coming into the group. He was certainly added value!!!*

[Manager: International Motor Vehicle Manufacturers]

*She was an asset to us, and from a very early stage showed a willingness to learn and get involved. She set herself high standards and she continued that throughout the year.*

[Manager: International Motor Vehicle Manufacturer]

*He has been an incredibly valuable asset for the company. His dedication and hard work can not be faulted.*

[Manager: UK Voluntary Sector Sports Organisation].

Many of the managers had grown accustomed to the high levels of professional support given to them personally by the placement students as they advanced through their placement:

*He is very pleasant young man eager to please and able to stick to the task in hand. I also will miss his ability to support me in my role*

[Manager: Local Radio]

*She has offered excellent support to a complex marketing model. Within 2 months of taking up the role, She was able to offer very full support and as her line manager, I have been able to delegate tasks of increasing complexity throughout the year.*

[Manager: Law Firm]

*Every quarter end he has assisted me in accurately reporting Northern Europe's financial results to our headquarters, which is then released to Wall Street.*

[Manager: USA based Electronics Company]

The students were placed in a mixture of SMEs and larger international organisations. Irrespective of type of organisation, it was apparent that the majority of managers were more than satisfied with the volume and level of work undertaken by placement students:

*He has helped process some internal processes and system which has therefore made a positive impact on others in the business.*

[Manager: UK Personnel Recruitment Organisation]

*He helped out the team by undertaking some core work as a result of losing people within the team to projects. He took this on without complaint and willingly. He has been a big help to my team.*

[Manager: Management Training Consultancy]

*She performed multiple tasks to the highest standard (and) adapted quickly & diligently, gaining admiration & respect within the departments.*

[Manager: UK Engineering Organisation]

*He has made several improvements to the working process and the tools used therein. He has dealt well with often complex analysis*

*and has also absorbed pressure when necessary and produced a consistently high quantity of output.*

[Manager: International Motor Manufacturer]

Others commented on the entrepreneurialism of individual students – particularly in relation to fiscal issues:

*She has assisted me by introducing a highly enterprising leveraging project... which has been extremely successful and has resulted in considerable savings for the company*

[Manager: International Electronics Organisation]

*As well as managing a programme that was worth \$20+m per annum, he increased and developed networking at all levels within the company and was a great asset to us.*

[Manager: International ICT Company]

*He also identified opportunities for the brands ... and effectively led [ ] projects to make work more efficient and cost saving...*

[Manager: International Confectionary Company]

Whilst some noted how the students' business-related competencies and skills had been integral resulted in the introduction of innovative work practices:

*Her contribution has been invaluable as her outstanding understanding of excel and generally IT systems has helped me develop innovative Business Plans and Presentations for reviews with suppliers and internal management*

[Manager: UK Engineering Organisation]

*Her work [ ] has transformed the website from 'Pedestrian' to 'Best Practice' – with web statistics to prove that the target audience approve of the improvements made.*

[Manager: UK Based Construction Company]

*(Student) has contributed new and exciting ideas...*

*IT skills, marketing skills, customer liaison skills...*

*She's brought all these to a new project in the company*

*which, largely down to her input, is proving a great success.*

[Manager: UK Based Manufacturing Organisation]

In summarising the placement students overall many of the managers referred to personal attributions:

*Overall we are extremely pleased with her performance, she is*

*an exemplary placement student (the best we have ever had)...*

*she is bright, articulate and very well liked by everyone she*

*has worked with.*

[Manager: International Electrical Goods Organisation]

*She is a very competent young lady with a fantastic personality...*

*She was a conscientious, hardworking individual and was a great asset to our organisation who will be greatly missed.*

[Manager: Local Non-Profit Organisation]

*He exceeded all expectations. He is extremely bright, focussed*

*and hard working. He has had an outstanding year and has set*

*a very high bar for the new incoming interns.*

[Manager: International ICT Organisation – USA Based]

## **Discussion**

This research has shown that, from employers' perspectives, "softer skills" and competencies acquired at university are integral to the development of entrepreneurial and innovative working practices by placement students. This finding builds upon previous research about the role played by work-placements in enhancing undergraduates' business related skills and abilities (Ellis, 2000; Robinson, 2000;

Quinn, 2000). This paper reinforces current thinking about the 'added-value' of paid work experience for students and gives some indication of the significant contribution that placement students can make both to the organisations in which they are placed and to industry as a whole (Stokes, 1993; Ellis, 2000). Although the students' duties ranged from basic administration to more complicated managerial and technological tasks, several of the student respondents indicated that they had limited opportunity to utilise fully the business skills, competencies and knowledge acquired in the first two years of undergraduate education and felt that they were not in a position to develop their entrepreneurial skills whilst on placement. Whilst this finding may be indicative of 'unrealistic' expectations on behalf of the placement students, it may also be linked with current debates about the under-employment of graduates which suggest that many graduates are employed in positions in which their skills and knowledge are under-used or not fully recognised by employers (Bolino & Feldman, 2000; Coulon, 2002; Nabi, 2003). However, it should be noted that none of the employers indicated that they believed the placement students were underemployed.

It is evident that there needs to be far more research in this area; primarily to make sure that both employers and students 'get the most' out of the placement programme, but also to evaluate students' *a priori* expectations in comparison with their post-placement experiences. Such research would by its very nature have implications for innovation, entrepreneurialism and graduate employability and employment.

Often identified as a key factor in enhancing graduate employability (Fallows & Stevens, 2000; Elias & Purcell, 2004), verbal and written communication skills were identified by the majority of employer respondents as being integral to the development of entrepreneurialism. This finding has clear pedagogical implications for the manner in which business courses encourage and challenge students to build on their 'softer' skills in addition to developing theoretical knowledge and academic ability (Monks, 1997; Boone, 2005; Pang & Ho, 2005).

The majority of employers identified leadership skills as a strength of their placement students. The fact that leadership skills are particularly challenging to teach and learn (Bradshaw, 2002; Marta et al, 2005; Elmuti, 2005) gives some indication of how important the placement is to the development of such skills. Although, many UK

undergraduate business courses do not incorporate work placements or internships. Universities do 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 innovation, leadership and self-confidence whilst providing the ideal medium in which students can 'grow' as individuals (Fenton et al: 1993, Liao-Troth & Dunn: 1999).

One of the most significant findings in the first half of the study related to *real-life* teaching and learning techniques such as the business game. The pedagogical benefits of incorporating some sort of 'business game' into the undergraduate business and management curricula have long been recognised (see for example, Bassler & Litterer, 1959; Frank, 1975; Hunter & Price, 1980). It is evident that the business game benefits the students in that it prepares them for the *real-life* challenges associated with the work environment (Faria, 1989; Faira & Wellington; Loredana, 2003) whilst providing the ideal forum for developing entrepreneurial and innovation skills.

The employers' comments about their perceptions of the students 'overall' placement performance give some indication of the progression and contribution made by the students during their placement. This paper suggests that professional work-placements provide the opportunity for undergraduates to gain valuable work-experience in an environment that is conducive both to individual entrepreneurialism and innovation. Furthermore, placement students can become an invaluable and integral part of the organisational team in which they are placed.

## **Conclusion**

This study has drawn attention to the benefits of undertaking a formal work-placement as part of a Bachelors Degree Programme from both employers' and students' perspectives. It has shown how formal periods of work experience 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 assess how universities could assist employers and students get the most out of the placement programme. Such research could encourage further employers to take on placement students and may also encourage universities to expand and develop existent and new placement programmes. Secondly, an alternative study, examining how universities might assist undergraduate students develop 'softer' intangible generic skills and competencies which in order to promote entrepreneurial and innovative thinking and practice, could provide the empirical grounding for curricula development in this area.

## Footnotes

### **1. Sandwich Courses**

The term ‘Sandwich Course’ refers to Undergraduate Programmes that have a period of formal work-experience built into the curriculum.

### **2. Combined Honours & Single Honours Degree Programmes**

At ABS, Combined Honours Degree Programmes involve studying two separate Disciplines to Bachelors Degree level. Each discipline either constitutes a ‘half’ a degree or represents a ‘major/minor’ combination. Students graduating from this programme receive a ‘Combined Honours Bachelors Degree’ in Science.



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