

The perceived value of work placements and part-time work and its diminution with time

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Abstract

This paper explores the perceptions of degree students at two UK universities regarding their work placement and part-time working activities, to assess if the two activities converge. The research comprises three stages: interviews for preliminary exploration of students' perceptions towards work placement and part-time work; interviews to examine how placement opportunities link with career aspirations; a survey of students who had completed a placement, and those currently on placement.

Students acknowledged part-time working helped their placement activity, providing transferable skills beneficial to both study and career aspirations. A significant finding was with respect to time: the closer to the placement activity the data was collected, the stronger the impact of appreciating the value of placement. The paper therefore highlights the value of timing in the assessment of work placement. It also offers value for universities' by providing insight into students' perceptions regarding embedded external work activities that can enhance graduate employability and career prospects.

Keywords: employability, placements, part-time work, careers

Introduction

The contemporary Higher Education (HE) environment in the UK is rapidly evolving, particularly with recent changes to funding for HE institutions and student fees. Within this dynamic arena, students are increasingly working part-time, with research indicating that financial drivers are the primary motivator (Crockford, Hordósy and Simms, 2015). However, research has also indicated that a host of surrogate reasons to work part-time while in full-time study sit alongside this financial driver, such as career impetus and personal development (Evans *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, HE institutions are becoming increasingly aware of the need to support students' transition into graduate employment by addressing the needs of employers more effectively. Therefore, work placement schemes built into degree programmes are commonplace in many parts of the western world and increasingly prevalent in the UK. Yet, this availability of work placements alongside increasing levels of part-time working creates an unusual mix of activities among both students and universities that transcend the traditional full-time taught degree scenario. This raises questions regarding students' perceptions of work placements against other part-time work opportunities, especially in supporting their future graduate employment opportunities. This paper aims to explore students' perceptions and understanding regarding their work placement and part-time working with a view to assess whether there is convergence between the two activities.

The needs of employers

Employers demand that graduates not only possess a range of skills and competences such as effective team-working and problem-solving (Finch *et al.*, 2013), but also demonstrate ability to make measurable contributions from the outset of employment (Rosenberg *et al.*, 2012). Yet, employers continue to question whether universities are producing graduates that meet their skills needs (Boden and Nedeva, 2010), especially small-medium enterprises (SMEs) where resources to recruit and subsequently support graduates, are limited (Heaton *et al.*, 2008). Graduates, although academically able, are increasingly deemed as not industry-ready (Mortimer *et al.*, 2016). This was reflected by the CBI (2016) report which found that 32% of employers were worried about literacy skills.

While there is a variety of literature discussing this mismatch, there is little agreement on the skills or areas that are deficient, with contrasting study results depicted (Tomlinson, 2017). Nonetheless, skills such as communication, team work and problem solving, are perceived as missing from graduates training, yet deemed essential for business success (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Evans *et al.*, 2015; Matsouka and Mihail, 2016). Graduates are deemed to lack professional work skills, with employers arguing that academic courses offered at university do not prepare students for work life (Evans *et al.*, 2015). This labour mismatch, suggests that graduates currently entering the market are considered by employers to not have appropriate levels of skills (Andrews and Higson, 2008). With this increasing level of mismatch, is also increasing doubt to the value of going to university, with graduate employability particularly subject to ongoing intense scrutiny (Matsouka and Mihail, 2016).

Graduate employability

However, graduate employability is subject of fierce academic debate, with various accompanying models and theories (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Boden and Nedeva, 2010; Evans *et al.*, 2015; Pool and Sewell, 2007). This complexity is often related to employability's subjective nature, with different stakeholders holding different perspectives on what makes individuals suitable for a role and what skills are valuable in the prevailing jobs market (Boden and Nedeva, 2010; Cranmer, 2006; Pinto and Ramalheira, 2017).

To combat this issue, literature has attempted to simplify the diverse nature of employability, stating it as "The character or quality of being employable" (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005: 199), although this invariably leads to the question of what does being employable mean? Consequently, Pan and Lee (2011) discussed how employability can extend to different qualities, in all aspects of an individual's character, which subsequently makes that individual more attractive to employers. Pan and Lee's (2011) definition also argued the concept of life-long learning and improvement, which was supported by Evans *et al.* (2015) who felt employability was the build-up of not only knowledge, but also comprised experience and character. Matsouka and Mihail (2016) also argue for a wider concept of employability, stating it was the possession of characteristics and skills required to find, get, and then be successful within a role. Similarly, Pool and Sewell (2007) echo this feeling, stating that employability must consider an individual's wider skills and attributes, and how these were used, and not just focus on employment status.

Employability theories

Neyt *et al.* (2017) reviewed published scientific literature on the impact of student work on educational outcomes since 1997. They provide comprehensive and sound theoretical arguments with empirical evidence from extant literature that aids the understanding of the main explanations and theories underpinning student employment and education outcomes. The theories include human capital theory, theory of the allocation of time, zero-sum theory, and the primary orientation theory (Neyt *et al.*, 2017).

The human capital theory states that education is an investment, offering high returns such as advanced skills, higher wages and a stronger economy, based upon the assumptions that higher qualifications result in higher productivity (Melink and Pavlin, 2012; Tomlinson, 2017). Although it is mainly relevant to early careers, where ability is measured through academic qualifications, primarily due to lack of other evidence, it remains a dominant theory in the development of skilled work force (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Melink and Pavlin, 2012; Mortimer *et al.*, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017). However, this proposition does not consider contextual factors (Melink and Pavlin, 2012). Andrews and Higson (2008) also argued that the concept is too heavily based on the idea that graduates are hired solely for their degree knowledge, which in reality is often a partial factor (Evans *et al.*, 2015).

Alternative employability theories include 'signal' and 'certificate' theories. The 'signal theory' states that academic achievements, not the time within education, act as signals to ability and potential. 'Certificate theory' uses academic qualifications to regulate the labour market, with different education levels offering different opportunities (Melink and Pavlin, 2012; Mortimer *et al.*, 2016). These also follow the belief that degrees act as a reflection of ability, achieved through wider training, and thus explain the relationship between education and employment (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Melink and Pavlin, 2012).

Nonetheless, these theories are heavily criticised due to their heavy reliance on academic achievements; Eraut (2011) believed that formal qualifications were irrelevant as they could

not fully represent an individual's capability, whilst Mortimer *et al.* (2016) agreed that qualifications were partially irrelevant as they were static and did not take into consideration changes over time or the need to adapt to changing economies. This means that many graduates were potentially out of date by the time they graduated. Melink and Pavlin (2012) and Mortimer *et al.* (2016) also disregard that academic results are not the only signals of employability, which can also be increased through experience, attitude and personal conditions.

The response of universities

Demands for greater collaboration between employers, universities and the graduates themselves have consequently ensued, to ensure individuals are more effectively prepared for jobs (Ishengoma and Vaaland, 2015; Rosenberg *et al.*, 2012). Employers are increasingly expecting graduates to have some form of work experience (Evans *et al.*, 2015; McMurray *et al.*, 2016). Since the Dearing Report (1997) recommended undergraduates should have an opportunity to undertake a period of work experience and the subsequent Leitch Report (2006) highlighted concerns over skill levels in the UK workforce, universities have become increasingly aware of the need to support students' transition into graduate employment through student-employer engagement. Work experience not only helps to orientate individuals to the work arena, but to facilitate a transfer of skills and appropriate work behaviours to full-time employment, although the process is dependent upon several other variables such as learner capability (Jackson, 2013a).

While sandwich courses have been provided in the UK since the 1950s (Brennan and Little, 1996), such programmes only comprise 10% of the UK undergraduate population (HESA, 2014) despite HESA (2014) stating graduates who studied on sandwich courses were more likely to find employment than non-sandwich graduates. Sandwich courses have largely been superseded by placement schemes. Undergraduate placements typically consist of working for an agreed period outside of university study, whereas sandwich degrees are typically four years with a work placement 'sandwiched' between the second and fourth year (Ward and Jeffries, 2004).

Placements provide students with work experience that produce benefits in terms of academic achievement and employability (Brooks, 2012). Knight and Yorke (2004) supports this stating that placements provide a positive contribution towards employability by allowing students to gain experience and develop knowledge. In addition, Jackson (2013b) found that employability skills such as problem-solving improved because of placement activity. Other studies found that graduates who undertook a placement were more likely to gain full time graduate-level employment than those without undertaking a placement within six months of graduating (Bowes and Harvey, 1999; Brookes and Youngson, 2016). This demonstrates a positive relationship between undertaking a placement and securing graduate employment. This was confirmed by Brooks (2012), who from analysing the destinations of graduates six months after graduation, found that no students who undertook a placement were classed as unemployed six months after graduation and those who took placement were more likely to be in employment six months after graduation than those without.

Despite the overwhelming positive effect of undertaking a work placement, and in some occupations, complaints (at least in the UK) of student overcrowding (Harrison, 2004), the recent economic downturn has resulted in placements being shunned by students to accelerate their progression into the labour market (Bullock *et al.*, 2009). This is exasperated by students failing to understand the value of work experience and how it might drive career aspirations (Aggett and Busby, 2011; Evans *et al.*, 2014). This is supported by Reddy and Moores (2012) who found that students did not consider placement to impact their career. In addition, Jackson

et al. (2017) highlight the difficulties for employers in finding an appropriate student experience to justify the placement activity.

Not only do placements enhance employability by developing employer-demanded skills (Paisley and Paisley, 2009), they are also perceived to yield higher academic performance (Duignan, 2003), although other studies have explored this phenomenon and produced contrasting findings. According to Duignan (2002) there was no significant difference in academic performance between two groups post placements. However, several studies (e.g. Auburn 2007; Crawford and Wang, 2015; 2016; Green, 2011; Jones *et al.*, 2017; Mansfield, 2011; Reddy and Moores, 2012) argue in favour of student placements, by showing that those who undertook placement improved their subsequent academic performance.

Nevertheless, Mansfield (2011) finds that not all students benefit from work placements and claims that stronger performing students are more likely to undertake placement, and hence produce a higher degree classification. Bullock *et al.* (2009) findings supports this, noting that the more capable, higher achieving students generally go on to do a placement. In addition, Bullock *et al.* (2009) also found that those students who undertake a work placement have clear views about their desired career path, with 80% of placement students confident of their career direction against only 58% non-placement students.

Nonetheless, research in this area is conflicting, with Arnold *et al.* (1993) reporting that those students who did not participate in a placement, were more specific in career direction and those who undertook placement were not. Arnold *et al.* (1993) however, claim those who undertake a placement are better off in terms of career direction, as they have given a wider consideration to potential careers than non-placement students. This view is supported by Zegwaard and Coll (2011) and Juznic and Pymm (2011) who noted that placements are beneficial in developing students' awareness of possible career paths, while the students themselves feel that skills are more effectively developed in the workplace (Jackson, 2015). Nonetheless, Wilton (2012) suggests the value of placements in supporting graduate careers, is a complex scenario comprising multiple variables. Despite the benefits associated with work activity within the HE environment, placements are still largely optional and an additional feature to the main learning experience, rather than an integral part of a degree programme (Harvey, 2005; Knight and Yorke, 2002).

Research questions, rationale and objectives for this study

The mix of employer-demands, university work schemes and students' part-time working creates an unusual mix for students and their respective universities that transcend the traditional full-time taught degree scenario. While Walmsley *et al.* (2006) have examined students' part-time work as a precursor to a placement, there remains a clear gap in literature regarding students' perceptions of industrial placements organised by their respective university, against their own initiated part-time work activity. Whereas previous research have examined several aspects of students' part-time work including its role on the students' personal and academic life (e.g. Crockford *et al.*, 2015, Gbadamosi *et al.*, 2015; Richardson *et al.*, 2009), and many others have examined the value of placement in students' careers (e.g. Brookes and Youngson, 2016; Reddy and Moores, 2012); studies have not examined what link exists between these two aspects and what impact this possible convergence may have on the actual decisions that students make regarding their careers.

In summary, this paper seeks to explore students' perceptions regarding their work placements and part-time working, and to assess whether there is a convergence of students' thinking on

placements and part-time work, while in study, as a strategy to improve graduate employment prospects. Questions concerning whether placements fulfil students' needs regarding money and career aspirations, or whether placements provide a short interlude to academic study, will inform universities' strategies towards placements and other work-related activities.

Research Approach

Overview of the Research Approach

The research participants for this study were full-time, undergraduate BA (Hons) Business Management students at two post-92 universities in England. The two universities, designated below as A and B respectively, were selected because they were the employing organisation of three of the authors at the time of data collection. This not only facilitated ready access to the students, but since the authors were already known to the participants, the existing relationships would be useful in raising awareness of the research and overcoming any apprehension about participating. Nonetheless, it can be argued that the resultant sample could be deemed as a 'convenience' or an 'opportunistic' sample (Pole and Lampard, 2013), which not only limits generalisability of the findings, but also that the results could have been affected by the existing relationships. In addition, both universities were similar in being classified as post-92 institutions, and therefore if the research was conducted in other UK universities, such as Russell Group establishments, different research outcomes might be obtained. Business students were selected, not only because of the authors involvement in that discipline, but it was also felt that individuals studying business would be more interested in observing organisations from the inside through a work activity. Whether business students are more aware of the benefits of engaging with businesses in order to improve their employability credentials when compared to other academic disciplines is, however, arguable. In both of the institutions, ethical approval was sought and granted for this research, after appropriate committee evaluation.

The research process chosen for this research was a mixed method approach. Previous works examining the topic of UK university students working part-time, had either used a quantitative approach, for example, Gbadamosi et al. (2015), or qualitative (see for example, Evans et al 2014; Richardson et al. 2014). By using a mixed method approach here, therefore, offers an element of originality in research approach for this subject. Mixed method has become increasingly popular in recent years, notably as an attempt to overcome criticisms attributed to both quantitative and qualitative methods (McKim, 2017). However, as Plano-Clark (2017) notes, it is the combining of methods that provides a greater contextualisation than would be possible with only a single method. When used sequentially, whereby each step is informed by the previous one, as is done here, a broader perspective can be achieved (Watkins and Gioia, 2015). Brannen and Halcomb (2009) noting, in particular, the use of questionnaires as a means of further exploring subsequent findings. The multiple perspectives of a mixed method approach, therefore, provides a more balanced picture and can generate greater insight (Tariq and Woodman, 2013), which can assist with interpretation. This broad perspective was felt to be important in this study, given the little academic work to date on this subject area and because of this, the research process being applied could also be deemed to be 'exploratory', (Neuman, 2014). An exploratory approach is useful in this study, since the initial broad exploration of issues at stage one not only provides flexibility but was then being used to formulate more precise questioning at subsequent stages.

The research approach comprised three stages:

Stage One: A preliminary exploration of students' perceptions

The first stage was a preliminary exploration of students' perceptions towards work placement and part-time working carried out at university A. It was felt that an interview-based approach would yield greater insight than a survey as the core interest was to investigate particularly why the students have opted for placement and how it compares with their part-time work experience if they have been involved in part-time work.

The research participants for this stage had just returned from a one-year work placement activity, which took place between academic years two and four of their degree. An e-mail requesting some participants was issued to the sixteen students who had just completed a placement. Eight positive responses to participate were received. Semi-structured interviews were held by only one of the researchers with each of the eight students, to minimise discrepancies and enhance the reliability and validity of data.

The interview was based around eight questions (see Supplementary Files), exploring why students chose to undertake a placement, the relationship of the placement to their chosen career path, and any part-time work before and after placement and how the two activities are connected or complementary. Students were encouraged to talk freely about their work placement and part-time job, with questions primarily used as prompts. Each interview was 20 and 35 minutes, and not recorded, as it was thought that this might have inhibited discussion. Instead, shorthand notes were taken which were crossed checked with respondents and approved post interviews. The interviews were subsequently written-up, and commonality within responses noted. Commonality was then examined across the questions to derive themes.

Stage Two – A further exploration of students' perceptions of their work placement and future careers

The second stage involved conducting semi-structured interviews with eight students who had just returned from a work placement at university B, to further explore their perceptions of the work placement, especially in relation to their expected career aspirations.

The interview was based around 6 questions (see Supplementary Files), exploring why students chose to undertake a placement, how the placement related to, or shaped, their career aspirations, whether the placement was beneficial in relation to desired career direction and about the placement organisation and if it was of job interest in the future. Students were encouraged to talk freely about their work placement and part-time job, with questions being used primarily as researcher prompts. The semi-structured interviews were conducted by one of the researchers at times suitable for the participants. Interviews lasted up to about 50 minutes each. Interviews were recorded, and participants were assured their responses remained anonymous and they could leave the interview at any time. This was agreed at the outset, through a signed participation document, which also helped participants feel comfortable and aware of the expectations of the research. Upon completion, the interviews were transcribed and given initial codes to identify similarities in terms of description. These were then grouped into sub themes. Sub themes were then organised into a mind map where key themes were created.

Stage Three – A Survey

The third stage extended the research to not only exploring the perceptions of those students who had completed a placement, but also those who were currently on their placement year. This was deemed important to see if the placement fulfilled students' needs regarding finance, experience, and career expectations and therefore negated the need to work part-time while on placement, or whether the two activities were perceived by students as mutually exclusive. The key aim of this stage in the research was to explore the perceived connection between the work placement and students' part-time working activity and thereby, broaden out the study. The respondents were a sample of students who had either completed placement (returnees) or currently on placement.

A questionnaire was developed (see table 3) targeting students in both universities – A and B. The questionnaire sought responses to 4 broad questions. (1) Students were asked to rank in order of importance, why they chose to do a work placement (see table 1). (2) Why they choose the placement organisation they work for (see table 2). Six options were offered to both questions and an opportunity to indicate and explain other reasons. (3) Respondents were asked to respond yes or no to 9 questions (see table 3) and in an open-ended space to also indicate the reason for their choice. (4) The final question the survey seeks to answer is whether there is a significant difference between the responses of the two groups of respondents – those currently on placement and those who had completed the placement earlier on. Previous studies that have investigated students on placement did not clearly indicate the timing of the data collection, if student had completed the placement or if they were currently on placement. By including this timing factor into this study, it provides a unique perspective and contributes to studies in this area. Personal information regarding age, gender and the sector worked in were also collected.

Questionnaires were prepared online using Qualtrics, with smartphone access option enabled to encourage participation. A matched paper copy was also prepared to be administered among the respondents who were returnees from placement in the final year of their course. The survey was open to the entire cohort over a 2-year period. The population comprise a total of 550 students in the two universities over a 2-year period. A total of 134 useable fully completed questionnaires were received representing 24.36% response rate. 56.7% were in their placement year and 43.3% were returnees from placement who were then in the final year. The demographic profile comprises females being 60.4%, and a total sample population of 92.5% aged between 20-25 years.

Data Analysis Procedures

This largely inductive study uses semi-structured interview as the major source of data for the two exploratory studies, stages one and two. For the data analysis, thematic analysis driven by the data was used, following the method described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Corbin and Strauss (2008). The second stage interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were read over several times to identify recurring and common themes. Open coding was applied after a narrative summary of the interview (Boeije, 2005). The method used allowed categories and themes to emerge from the data without prior ideas being imposed. Rigorous double checking ensured a representative theme was achieved (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

For the survey captured on Qualtrics, students typed out their qualitative responses as further explanation for their choice of yes or no (as indicated in stage three). The open-ended responses were then read over several times using the same style for analysing the interviews to draw out

the key themes. The responses from both universities students were combined, with no distinction between respondents.

Findings

The findings are presented in accordance with the multi-stage, mixed method approach deployed.

Stage 1 – Preliminary exploratory interviews on why students chose to undertake a placement and what value the placement was perceived to add to an individual's profile

The preliminary exploratory interviews revealed that students chose to undertake a work placement to gain experience, improve their career prospects and differentiate themselves. Of less importance was improved knowledge in itself or in relation to their course. Three of the eight participants had made a connection between the placement and their desired career path, with one stating, *“I wanted to change career direction and saw the placement as an excellent opportunity to do that”*. Yet three others conversely stated that the placement did not contribute to their chosen career. It seemed the relationship between the placement and how it might drive an individual's career remained tenuous. This is an unexpected finding and one that opens up questions regarding social class in particular. The findings of a large study undertaken by Bradley et al. (2013) found that those students from a middle-class background had greater connections either through family or friends that would help facilitate entry into the jobs market and therefore negate some of the expected benefits typically associated with placements or internships such as impetus to graduate career. The lack of career connection to the placement was also evident in the reasons why students had chosen that particular organisation, with comments such as, *“Took the first placement offered”*, *“To remain living in the area”*, while others selected blue-chip organisations as it was deemed it would enhance their respective profile, *“High profile company”*, *“Market leader”*, and *“Good company to put on CV”*.

Six out of the eight participants had worked part-time before going on placement, primarily for financial reasons, rather than to enhance career progression or develop employability skills, with quotations such as, *“Money to survive”* and *“Money made it easier to maintain student lifestyle”*. It is interesting to note that none of the students who undertook part-time work while studying did so for experience and to develop employability skills. The two students who did not work part-time, wanted to concentrate on the degree, with one stating, *“Only want to work full-time when graduated”*. This suggests students overlook the value part-time work could bring in developing employability skills, leaving this to be derived solely from placement activity.

However, six out of the eight interviewees felt that their previous part-time working did help them on the placement activity, mainly from previous product or industry knowledge that was easily transferred between workplaces, or merely experience of job interviews. There was also recognition that individuals' respective part-time work had been useful in securing a placement, *“Helped me get a placement as the manager said it showed I was an active person with transferable skills”*, *“It meant I could adapt to routines”*, *“Previous experiences helped on the placement initially”*, *“Helped me get a placement. Do not think I would have got role if not been in employment before placement”*. There is, therefore, a suggestion in the responses that employers are looking for students to contribute to the business through the placement activity,

and this is perceived by them to be derived from previous part-time employment. This should be welcomed by universities and students, since it indicates that employers seek to derive value from a placement activity and not merely go through the motions.

In summary, students generally acknowledged the benefit of undertaking a placement, *“Placement has helped develop employment skills”, “It has broadened my experiences and understanding. My personal confidence has improved”*.

Stage 2 – Further Interviews linking placement with career aspirations

The three key themes that emerged from this set of interviews were confirmed as employability, academic impact and career aspirations.

Employability

The participants felt that by carrying out a placement that they were more likely to gain graduate-level employment upon leaving university.

“I read somewhere about if you were faced with a competitor i.e. someone else who had a degree who hasn’t done a placement you were 80% more likely to get a job over them, based on the fact that you had experience within the industry, so that was my main rationale for wanting to undertake a placement”. (Participant 1)

“I chose to do a placement because of the experience, I thought it would help me get a graduate job upon graduation”. (Participant 7)

The two comments clearly indicate that students perceive a direct relationship between taking a placement and increasing their graduate employability chances due to the experience gained. This finding is supported by Bowes and Harvey (1999) and Brooks (2012), who found that graduates, who undertook a placement, were more likely to gain full time graduate employment than those graduates who did not. It seems that placements are deemed by participants to provide competitive advantage:

“I feel placement gives you a competitive advantage over those who haven’t done a placement”. (Participant 6)

Academic Impact

Participants indicated that the placement impacted on their final year options to support further their career aspirations. Largely placement supported or clarified required academic impact and helps to shape final career decision pathway options.

“I would say it’s helped me become more focused and help me to tailor my degree and help me refine it a bit more into the path I want to take”. (Participant 1)

This indication that placement has impacted their career aspirations and the tailoring of their degree to pursue a particular career. However, it also highlights a positive impact placement has made to final year focus and determination to succeed in units they have specifically chosen to pursue career aspirations. Previous research discussed by Green (2011) highlighted students who undertook placements produced significant higher results than those without. Similarly, these findings suggest that placements evidently increased focus and motivation to succeed to achieve career aspirations:

“Not only has it helped my career aspirations in the sense of what I want to do and the career goals I set myself, I think it helps you coming back to university in final year as it gives you a lot more focus and drive”. (Participant 5)

Career Aspirations

Career aspirations was a key theme within the interviews and the findings show that a placement makes a perceived positive contribution towards career aspirations:

“Placement impacted my career aspirations as I now want to pursue a different career, it’s helped to eliminate careers I don’t want”. (Participant 7)

This comment demonstrates how placement impacted the participants’ choice of career and indicates how placement benefitted their career aspirations by confirming their chosen career and eliminating others.

For Participant 3, the placement impacted on their career aspirations by not only changing career direction, but focusing on a completely different industry sector.

“Before placement I wanted to go into car manufacturing, when I was looking for my placement I was going for those kinds of companies, but I applied for a marketing position in an entertainment organisation and got the job. Placement has changed my career aspirations and now I’m pursuing a career in marketing within entertainment organisations”. (Participant 3)

Similarly, placement also impacted on participants focus by providing them with useful information.

“Placement has given me a better focus of what I would like to do after university, it’s given me the means of how I can achieve and gain employment and the career path I want to follow”. (Participant 2)

“Placement has confirmed the career path I want to follow, working has provided me with significant information into what careers I want and what I don’t want. Placement has benefited me in determining the career I want”. (Participant 4)

The comments of Participants 2 and 4 are significant, since they confirm that a placement helped their choice in career path and provided them with information for achieving their career aspirations. The discovery by participants of information regarding how they can achieve their career aspirations highlights that placement not only helps to determine their career aspirations but provides information into how to achieve them.

“In the beginning placement did not match my career aspirations, but after completing placement I now want to go into this industry, therefore placement has impacted me to pick a different career”. (Participant 5)

The comments for Participant 5 suggest that despite not undertaking a placement matched to their career aspirations, the individual ended up changing their career aspirations as a direct result of the placement. This shows a positive impact that despite placement not originally matching career aspirations, by gaining experience in a business environment it can develop career aspirations and inspire opportunities that students were initially unaware of.

“Placement has impacted my career aspirations, I always knew I wanted to go into the commercial sport scene but what I really learnt was that I want to run my own business and it’s not something I really knew beforehand”. (Participant 1)

“It’s something I generally think about every day of my life, my long-term career aspirations, how can I get to where I want to go and the things I’ve got to do to achieve that, and I think doing a placement was a huge part of that it really opened my eyes up to the real world”. (Participant 1)

Participant 1’s placement inspired them to desire starting a business and led them to think about their career aspirations daily. These findings indicate that placement not only impacts career aspirations but that it impacts long term goals and aids discovery of other career aspirations like starting a business, which may not have been realised without undertaking a placement.

Stage 3 – Survey Result

The opportunity to gain work experience and to enhance career prospects were the two most important reasons adduced by respondents (see table 1), with these two justifications ranked first or second by most respondents. However, the perceived opportunity to increase knowledge and develop contacts in industry was deemed less important. This finding might again support those of Bradley et al. (2013), whereby those from more middle-class backgrounds already had a more extensive network of contacts that would support an individual’s progression from university into employment and therefore any contacts derived from work experience were deemed less important.

[Place Table 1 approximately here]

Responding to what influenced the selection of the particular placement organisation (table 2), most of the responses were equally split between accepting the first role offered and the attractiveness of the role/job. The next important justification was due to the profile or reputation of the organisation.

[Place Table 2 approximately here]

The third element of the questionnaire comprised the dichotomous questions (yes/no response), with a prompt to provide justification for their answers. This procedure also has the methodological advantage that it forces respondents to think their answer through before committing to one of the options yes/no. The broad response is provided in table 3.

[Place Table 3 approximately here]

Is work placement beneficial to final year studies? This dichotomous question generated 82% affirmation and a total of 62 narratives and generated the following common themes: *Opportunity to improve skills and competencies; Checking and applying theory in practice and gaining a real- world experience; Soft skills development.*

Opportunity to improve skills and competencies: Many of the students indicated that they have improved in terms of technical skills, such as Excel and soft skills, such as improved communication and confidence among others. This is exemplified in:

“I think it will allow me to be more focused in knowing I have to study during certain times and allowing me to work towards a clearer end goal.”

“I gained time management skills, practical knowledge, and constantly meeting deadlines”.

Checking and applying theory in practice and gaining a real-world experience: The ability to gain experience and knowledge allowed the students an opportunity to practically test much of what was learned in theory, in a real-time working environment;

“Placement is hugely important for so many reasons. It has helped with applying for graduate roles, giving me experience of a hard day's work, getting up early and giving me a reason for working hard in my final year - I want to work in a role and industry that I enjoy and to do so it requires dedication and hard work.”

“We have better knowledge and more experience compared to other graduates without a placement.”

“Having a break from studies helped to refresh me and having relevant work experience helped me to relate theory to practice.”

Soft skills development: This is an area many employers have argued seem poorly developed in students (Evans *et al.*, 2015). Many respondents confirmed that this was a very critical part of their experience and value adding during their placement.

“Best experience you can get, and I've matured as a person for final year. Boy has become a man!”

“It has provided me with the soft skills and work ethic to hit the ground running”

Is work placement beneficial to your future career aspirations? This question generated a 91% affirmation and 58 narratives. These included: providing industry and work experience, enhanced CV, valuable contacts, provided better understanding of the job environment. Many respondents have been offered a graduate job.

“I feel the role I'm in certainly improves my career aspirations however the company does show several signs of nepotism and therefore feel the company is not beneficial to my career aspirations.”

“I was given a wide range of responsibilities, enhancing my CV”

“It has created useful contacts as well as identifying potential career prospects”

“Secured a graduate job in a good role”

“The experience has made me re-evaluate my career aspirations and I am able to assess them with more knowledge of the business world making my aspirations far more detailed, tailored to my interests and focused on the personal development I want to undertake.”

Are there any similarities between your part-time job and the work placement? About 65% responded in the negative depicting little connection between the two activities:

“Am working in an advocates company while my part time job was on a retail”

“Bar work and marketing differ”

“Everything is very different, better.”

“My part time work was purely to earn some money. I really enjoyed my placement a lot more as it is the industry I want to go into in the future.”

Did working part-time prior to your work placement, help you in any way whilst on the work placement? About 60% responded in the affirmative.

“My area manager told me the only reason I got the job was because I has previous work experience from the age of 16”

“I developed personal skills such as time management prior to placement”

“I used many skills acquired during my part time employment.”

“I was already comfortable with meeting new people and using my interpersonal skills which I had learnt in my previous job which was helpful when integrating myself in to the new team and working collaboratively with other members of my department which I had to do from early on.”

“I was used to dealing with customers and solving queries.”

Work placement link to career aspirations. About 77% of respondents were affirmative on this question.

“This is both a yes/no answer. Yes, because I worked closely with clients from internationally recognised brands which is what I want to do, however I worked in a Marketing Department for a manufacturer which is what I DON'T want to do.”

“Directly - I wanted the particular placement and a job from it”

“I am still unsure of what career path I want to take but my placement allowed me to investigate a different path”

“I do not plan on working in this industry for a career”

Developing career at part-time or placement organisation: With respect to the part-time organisation, a total of 80% answered in the negative. Conversely, when asked same question

about the placement organisation a total of 70% responded positively. This is exemplified in the following quotes.

“A retail career is not something that I could say that I would be happy with”

“Definitely - I have already been offered a job part time next year and then full time after university”

“It is a family run company with a niche product, incompetent management with a high level of regular redundancies and a lack of opportunity to progress my career. I thoroughly enjoyed my time as a placement student as these things did not affect me, but for my career this would be a wrong step.”

“The company does not live up to reputation and all I've seen from permanent employees is low morale and low pay.”

“Interested, but have accepted a job with a different firm. In the future, however, I could potentially work for them again.”

Long-term career plan: About 62% responded affirmatively to this question. For much of these students' their career ambition would have become clearer and better developed because of the experience they gained during the placement.

“ACA qualified in 4 years, a partner in an accountancy firm in 15 years”

“Aiming to develop to HR Director level in a multi-national organisation.”

“I have an idea of where I want to progress to in my career, but no firm set plans as I believe this can close doors.”

“I'm not sure what I want to do still”

“Not really unfortunately. Still need to figure it out.”

“Qualify with big 4 firm, then move back down south but continue to work for big 4 firm. Achieve partner status (hopefully)”

Is the value of part-time work different from those of placement?

An independent t-test was also conducted to examine significant differences in the responses between students who were currently on placement at the time of data collection and those who had done their placement the previous year (and were now in final year at the time of data collection) with respect to each of the 9 dichotomous questions respondents were asked.

[Place Table 4 approximately here]

The Levene's test for equality of variance shows significant variance between the two groups with respect to 3 of the 9 items. The first two differences relate to how beneficial placement is to final year studies and then to career aspirations. Respondents who were currently on placement significantly consider the placement as more beneficial to final year studies than those who had returned to university and are in the final year. One may argue that this significant difference may have been affected by recency effect. The placement students

appreciate the value of placement and may potentially exaggerate this value. Final year students on the other hand were less positive about the value of the placement. Similarly, placement students significantly more than the returnees consider placement as more beneficial to future career aspirations. Again, this may be best explained by the euphoria of the value of placement they are currently engaged in. The third significant difference is evidenced regarding the interest of the respondents in developing a career in their placement organisation. Respondents currently on placement significantly more than their returnee counterparts indicated a desire to develop their careers in their placement organisations.

Overall, the t-test suggests that empirical data obtained from students regarding the value of placement may vary significantly depending on the timing of data collection. Researchers may therefore want to pay attention to this specific issue as they plan data collection, given the effect it has on perceptions of participants.

Conclusion

Data collected from students who have just returned from placement against those currently on placement, disclosed some significant differences in perception. The closer data collection was to placement activity, the stronger the appreciation of its value. This perception diminishes over time. A placement is perceived to provide a personal competitive advantage over graduates who have not undertaken a similar activity. The placement is seen by students to develop employment skills, providing a broader range of experiences than would normally be honed on a degree programme. Similarly, the increase in confidence in their own abilities because of the placement, suggests a more readily self-prepared graduate, to face the arena of post-degree recruitment.

While the preliminary interviews found students' connection between placement and career direction tenuous, the findings produced from the later interviews indicated placement making a significant impact on career aspirations. Previous research by Arnold *et al.* (1993) and Bullock *et al.* (2009) produced similar conflicting findings in placement students' career aspirations. It is interesting to highlight, however, that several students merely accepted the first placement offered, or selected it because of the convenience of the employer's location, both of which suggests students do not strategically link the placement with their career aspirations, or given that 37% do not have a career plan, potentially drift into the placement without consideration to career outcomes. This does, however, echo the findings of the 'paired peers' report into the effects of social class on university students' perceptions (Bradley *et al.* (2013) where those individuals from working-class backgrounds chose more frequently to be close to family, as the preferred place of study. Nonetheless, the positive attributes described by the students, suggests that the placement activity yielded opportunities that they would have not discovered without experience gained from placement. Moreover, placement seems to help clarify career direction. Given that most students work part-time before entering a placement, clarity of career vision would not therefore be derived from making first-contact with the world of work, but clearly offers greater insight to potential career than part-time work yields.

While students are tending to shun their part-time jobs while on placement, the contribution of part-time work in supporting the placement activity is evident to 60% of them, typically citing the softer, interpersonal skills the developed. In addition, it seems that some individuals secured their placement based on their part-time work experience. With placement opportunities potentially becoming more competitive in the future, part-time work experience seemingly

offers a conduit into placement. While students recognise the value of part-time work in the acquisition of a placement, they fail to see the long-term value part-time work can similarly bring, especially developing transferable skills, that could enhance their graduate employment opportunities.

Nonetheless, throughout the three research stages, there were suggestions that social class could be a key influencer of students' perceptions, especially regarding the value of work experience in helping to gain contacts that could support future career progression. Given that both universities were post-92 and not Russell group establishments would suggest that students in this study were from more working-class backgrounds. However, both institutions had nearby conurbation areas of relative affluence, that could have therefore seen student recruitment from more middle-class backgrounds and hence provide possible insight into some of the unexpected research findings, such as the lack of usefulness of work contacts derived from a placement.

As universities seek ways to improve the employability of their graduates, two key weapons available to them are placements and the part-time work. There are clearly perceived benefits to be derived from both. Both develop skills that are desirable to employers, and provide insight and orientation to individuals, in respect of career aspirations. Universities need to make the most of their students' part-time work – feeding into placements, highlighting work practices and providing insight.

This work has provided new insights into students' perceptions of placement and part-time work, and the interplay between the two discrete activities. Opportunities for researchers to explore this connection and seek to crystallise it in the minds of students offers further scope for research. In addition, the limitations of this paper centres around the use of two UK-based, post-92 universities and the perceptions of students on business degrees which offers researchers opportunities to now expand into other institutions and other discipline areas. Similarly, also affords the opportunity to now extend the work of Bradley et al. (2013) in exploring the connections between social class and the work experience and part-time work nexus could potentially yield interesting outcomes.

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Supplementary Files

Appendix 1 – Preliminary Interview Questions

General

1. Why did you do a work placement?
2. Did you work part-time while on the degree programme before undertaking the placement? (If yes, or no, explain the reasons for, or not, working

For those who have previously worked part-time while studying for the degree

1. What part-time work did you do?
2. Do you intend to go back to the part-time job now that the placement is completed? (Explain)
3. Are there similarities between your part-time work and the placement you have just completed?
4. Did working part-time prior to your placement help you on your placement (in what way)?
5. Does your placement or part-time work link to your career aspirations (Explain)?
6. Any other points regarding part-time work while at university or your placement?

Appendix 2 – Placement Interview Questions

1. Can you explain why you undertook a placement and where?
2. Was your role at work related to your career aspirations?
3. Will you be returning to this organisation upon graduation?
4. Can you explain whether you would recommend undergraduate students to do a placement and why?
5. Can you describe if the placement impacted upon your career aspirations?
6. Do you feel your career aspirations have benefited or been disadvantaged by taking a placement?

**The perceived value of work placements and part-time work and its diminution with time
[TABLES – 4 TABLES]**

Table 1: Ranking of why respondents choose to do a work placement

Reason	Ranked 1 st (%)	Ranked 2 nd (%)
Gain work experience	37.6	30.1
Enhance career prospects	37.6	25.6
Differentiate self from other graduates	12.0	18.0
Enhance personal skills	3.0	11.3
Increase knowledge	3.0	9.0
Develop contacts in the industry	2.3	6.0
See a different perspective	0.8	10.5

Table 2: Factors that influenced the selection of the placement organisation

	Reason	Number	Percentage
1	Accepted first one offered	39	29.1
2	The role/job	39	29.1
3	Profile/reputation of the organisation	32	23.9
4	Location	11	8.2
5	Previous experience in industry/organisation	8	6
6	Others	5	3.7

Table 3: Survey Items

	Dichotomous Items	Yes	No
1	Is work placement beneficial to final year studies?	81.3	18.7
2	Is work placement beneficial to your future career aspirations?	91.8	8.2
3	Did you work part-time whilst on the degree, before undertaking the placement?	64.9	35.1
4	Are you continuing/did you continue to work part-time at the same time as doing the work placement?	14.4	85.6
5	Are there any similarities between your part-time job and the work placement?	35.9	64.1
6	Did working part-time prior to placement help you in any way whilst on-placement?	60.2	39.8
7	Does/did your work placement link to your career aspirations?	76.9	23.1
8	Would you be interested in developing a career at your placement organisation?	70.5	29.5
9	Do you have a long-term career plan?	62.7	37.3

Table 4: T-test checking significant difference between the two groups

s/n	Dichotomous Items	Means		t-Test for equality of means		
		Placement	Returnees	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
1	Is work placement beneficial to final year studies?	1.30	1.03	4.168	132	.000
2	Is work placement beneficial to your future career aspirations?	1.14	1.00	3.109	132	.002
3	Did you work part-time whilst on the degree, before undertaking the placement?	1.37	1.33	.488	132	.627
4	Are you continuing/did you continue to work part-time at the same time as doing the work placement?	1.84	1.88	-.670	130	.504
5	Are there any similarities between your part-time job and the work placement?	1.65	1.63	.220	126	.826
6	Did working part-time prior to placement help you in any way whilst on-placement?	1.46	1.32	1.572	126	.118
7	Does/did your work placement link to your career aspirations?	1.22	1.24	-.239	132	.812
8	Would you be interested in developing a career at your placement organisation?	1.41	1.14	3.417	130	.001
9	Do you have a long-term career plan?	1.34	1.41	-.846	132	.399