Reassessing the value of work-experience placements in the context of widening participation in higher education

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A questionnaire was distributed to the heads of graduate recruitment in 900 British firms querying the recipients’ views on (1) the main benefits alleged to accrue to students on vocational degrees who complete work experience periods; (2) the value for graduate employability of paid work undertaken during term time and vacations; and (3) the contributions to employability of academic group work within vocational degrees. A conjoint analysis examined the participants’ evaluations of the relative importance of a job applicant having graduated from a programme that included a work placement, compared with the candidate possessing a ‘good’ class of degree, a qualification from a pre-1992 university rather than a post-1992 institution, and a degree with substantial group-work content. It emerged that (despite the many changes in the British higher education environment occurring over the last couple of decades [top-up fees, widening participation, students engaging extensively in term-time employment, etc.]) most of the respondents held generally positive opinions regarding the usefulness of work placements. Sample members also tended to favour job applicants whose degrees had contained elements of group work. The class of degree a person had obtained and the type of university attended were seen as substantially less important for employability than whether the individual had completed a work placement.

Keywords: work placements; internships; employability; sandwich courses; academic group work

Introduction

Industrial and commercial work experience placements have been a common feature of UK vocational undergraduate degree and diploma programmes for more than 40 years, and their effectiveness as a vehicle for improving students’ vocational competences has been extensively researched (for details of relevant literature see, for example, Auburn, Ley, and Arnold 1993; Huntingdon, Stephen, and Oldfield 1999; Ellis 2000; Crebert et al. 2004; Murdoch 2004). Overwhelmingly, investigations have concluded that formal work placements bestow significant benefits on both the student and the employing firm. Indeed, the government-commissioned Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997) recommended that, with immediate effect, government agencies should establish links with employer and professional associations with the aim of encouraging many more businesses to offer work experience opportunities to students. Advantages to graduates of vocational courses that incorporate formal work placements allegedly include an easier transition from university into full-time employment, faster adjustment to organisational norms (Anakwe and Greenhaus 2000), a stronger vocational self-concept (Callanan and Benzing 2004),

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greater self-confidence in ‘real life’ working situations (Davison, Brown, and Davison 1993; Arnold et al. 1999), and the ability to reflect constructively on issues related to work (Neill and Mulholland 2003). Graduates who enter the labour market having completed work placements are supposedly more committed and adaptable (Leslie and Richardson 2000) and possess superior transferable skills (e.g. oral and written communications, initiative, time management, analysis and problem solving – see Davison, Brown, and Davison 1993; Ellis 2000). These individuals are familiar with the world of work and with how organisations function, thus facilitating their ability to plan their careers wisely (Neill and Mulholland 2003; Callanan and Benzing 2004; Murdoch 2004). Crebert et al. (2004) cited ‘learning to work in teams’ and ‘being able to accept responsibility’ as major benefits arising from work placements (p. 150), because team activities and the assumption of responsibility were instrumental in developing critical thinking, the capacity to make decisions, persuasion, cooperation, ethical awareness, and several other occupationally valuable competences.

Employers also supposedly gain from hiring graduates of vocational courses that contain work placements because the people they take on should possess more realistic expectations of employment situations (Arnold et al. 1999), be less likely to experience entry or reality shock on starting a full-time job (Callanan and Benzing 2004), require less training (Leslie and Richardson 2000), and be more ambitious (Callanan and Benzing 2004) and motivated (Leslie and Richardson 2000). If the graduate the company employs had undertaken a work placement at the firm in question then the enterprise would have benefited from the third-party screening service offered by a university placement office and would have obtained valuable pre-selection information about the individual during his or her placement period (Huntingdon, Stephen, and Oldfield 1999; Ellis 2000).

It has been claimed, moreover, that higher education (HE) institutions derive significant advantages from sending students on work placements. Links with industry and commerce are nurtured that can be used to inform curriculum and syllabus design, and firms that accept work-placement students can be encouraged to engage in further collaborative ventures with an institution (Blackwell et al. 2001). Associations with industry should help ensure that curricula reflect the dynamics of the marketplace and the combination of knowledge and skills that will be expected of graduates in the ‘real’ business world (St. Armant 2003, 235). A university’s overall credibility in the business world should be enhanced (Cook, Parker, and Pettijohn 2004). Also, the employer’s contribution to the intellectual development of the individual student may be substantial in view of the fact that academic courses on vocational degrees cannot teach all the competences needed for a career in a particular field (Arnold et al. 1999). A work placement can inculcate new employability skills and reinforce the application of vocational techniques learned in the classroom (Gault, Redington, and Schlager 2000). Importantly, students are likely to reflect on the usefulness of the information received at university (Crebert 2004). Discipline-specific knowledge, generic skills and personal attributes can be applied in contexts much closer to those that will be encountered after graduation (Atkins 1999).

As sandwich courses normally involve vocational subjects, they have been most common in the post-1992 universities (i.e. the former polytechnics). It is relevant to note in this connection that a number of pre-1992 universities have begun to offer a wide range of vocationally orientated degrees (UCAS 2006), but without work placements. A primary motivation for the present study was the observation that the market share of all undergraduate students undertaking business degrees in Greater London held by one of the (post-1992) universities participating in the investigation fell from 18% in 2001 to 13% in 2004. A detailed analysis of the relevant data revealed that the decline was substantially attributable to four Greater London pre-1992 universities having introduced degrees in business subjects. None of the vocational degrees offered by these universities included work placements (although all contained units concerned with
employability’). These universities were seemingly attracting students who previously might well have chosen a vocational sandwich course at a post-1992 university. (Sandwich course students at post-1992 universities in London often possessed matriculation qualifications at the top end of the range of those held by people entering this type of institution.) The students choosing a vocational degree programme without a work placement in a pre-1992 university presumably believed that it would carry more weight in the graduate labour market than a sandwich degree from a lower status post-1992 university. In general, moreover, the number of students selecting certain genres of the ‘traditional’ sandwich course, e.g. the BA in Business Studies, has declined substantially in British universities in recent years. Concomitantly, vocational three-year ‘modular’ degrees that offer wide ranges of options have increased in popularity. Recently published Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data show that since 1999 the proportion of students taking sandwich courses in the UK has fallen from 9% in 1999–2000 to just over 7% in 2004–2005 (Little and Harvey 2006). Post-1992 universities have seen the most notable decline, from 15,110 students in 1998–1999 to just 11,060 in 2004–2005.

The study reported in the remainder of this paper sought to add to contemporary knowledge about the value of work experience placements via a survey of employers’ views regarding the contributions of a work placement to the employability of a graduate of a vocational degree, compared with the person having undertaken part-time paid jobs during his or her student years and to the inclusion in the individual’s degree programme of a large amount of formally assessed group work. Employers’ attitudes towards the importance of work placements relative to degree class and type of university attended were also examined. The next section briefly reviews prior academic literature pertaining to the alleged benefits of work placements. This is followed by the specification of a number of research questions and a description of the methodology whereby these questions were addressed. Outcomes to the study are then stated and discussed. The paper concludes with suggestions for further research.

The need to reassess the alleged benefits of work placements

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned advantages claimed for formal work placements on vocational degrees, it is necessary to assess their effectiveness periodically by comparing employers’ views of the value of sandwich placements against other forms of work experience, and also to evaluate employers’ opinions as to whether placements (and alternative types of work experience) are more important than degree class or whether the degree was from a pre- or post-1992 university. In the contemporary higher education world a number of questions merit investigation, as follows.

Rise of term-time employment

Students develop personal and professional skills through living away from home, through ‘gap years’, by undertaking voluntary activities, and by participating in clubs and societies. The skills acquired via these experiences might improve a person’s employability (Atkins 1999). In Britain, moreover, student funding arrangements now mean that large numbers of students spend many hours a week in paid employment (TUC 2006). This is especially true of students from poorer backgrounds, with (nationally) 61% of students from routine/manual backgrounds undertaking some form of paid employment during term time. Students who live at home are much more likely to work than those who live away from home (TUC 2006) and are nearly twice as likely to attend post-1992 universities as ‘old’ universities (Callender and Wilkinson 2003). Bennett and Kottasz (2006) found that in a sample of 630 students entering a post-1992 university in 2005 12% predicted that they would have to spend more than 21 hours a week in paid employment;
18% expected to spend 17 to 20 hours; and 30% anticipated 13 to 16 hours. Only 4% of the sample stated that they did not expect to have to spend any time whatsoever doing paid jobs. Additionally, there has been a marked increase in the number of mature students (21 and over) entering higher education. In 2003–2004 mature students formed around 60% of the total undergraduate body (DFES 2005). In general, the average age of British undergraduate students is rising. (In one of the authors’ home universities the average age of a beginning first-year undergraduate in 2005 was 21.4 years.) ‘Mature’ students will have been in full-time employment already and, according to Shepherd (1998a), might not need to return to work in order to improve their personal skills. It is reasonable to assert therefore that nowadays most students receive work experience irrespective of whether their course includes a formal work placement.

Changes in the profile and employment backgrounds of today’s students (particularly those in the post-1992 universities where vocationally based sandwich courses are the most common) raise the question of whether work placements on vocational degrees develop occupational competences and enhance employability to significantly greater extents than experiences gained from ‘normal’ term-time paid employment and/or from jobs completed before entry to university and during vacations. Arguably, students who spend 10 to 14 hours a week in paid employment obtain work experience equivalent to that available from a ‘thin’ work placement programme, i.e. one that involves the student spending one day a week with a business over a single semester (see Shepherd 1998b). Some employers have been found to prefer thin placements on the grounds that (1) they do not require a firm to take on a long-term commitment; (2) inputs are ‘flexible’; and (3) less supervision is required (Shepherd 1998b, 12). Similar points could be made vis-à-vis the engagement of students for casual term-time employment. On the other hand, informal work experience of this nature does not follow any set order and may lack variety (Anakwe and Greenhaus 2000). Also, because the student’s activities are not formally assessed, the work experience is unlikely to be followed by critical reflection (Bennett, Dunne, and Carré 2000).

**Increasing use of group work**

In most British universities, undergraduate vocational degrees now involve substantial amounts of group work, which allegedly offers many opportunities for the development of leadership, interpersonal and communication skills (Dunne 2000). It is known that the great majority of large companies use teams (increasingly self-managing teams – see Cohen and Bailey 1997) to execute managerial projects. Group work undertaken at universities is said to mirror the interdisciplinary team-based activities routinely completed in real-life business situations (Pfaff and Huddleston 2003; Scribner, Baker, and Howe 2003). Among the many vocationally related benefits claimed to accrue to students consequent to their involvement in academic group work are the improvement of their generic skills such as critical thinking, negotiation and conflict resolution (Gatfield 1999; Young and Henquihet 2000; Phipps et al. 2001; Pfaff and Huddleston 2003) and the inculcation of tolerance for people of different cultures, ethnicities and ages (King 1999). Group work supposedly induces individuals to devote more effort to tasks, to become more active and involved in communal tasks, and to achieve a greater depth of learning (Reed and Mitchell 2001). Pfaff and Huddleston (2003, 38) extended the advantages alleged to arise from group work to include improvements in a person’s ‘persistence when faced with adversity, willingness to perform difficult duties, and ability to translate knowledge from one task to another’. Moreover, according to Zariski (1996), the peer-reviewing skills required by group work provide excellent preparation for students’ subsequent working lives because, as graduate employees, they ‘will need to assess the quality of the work of their subordinates, their peers, their supervisors and, realistically, themselves’ on an ongoing basis (p. 2). It is relevant to note
that these supposed benefits correspond quite closely to the advantages claimed for work placements (see above). Does this imply that the benefits to an individual of completing a formal work placement are lower for people whose university vocational degrees contained substantial amounts of group work?

Another pertinent question is whether graduate recruiters recognise the value of academic group work as a device for nurturing vocationally relevant skills. If they do, then it is to be expected that recruiters will seek information about a job candidate’s involvement in and performance during university group work activities. Cohen and Bailey (1997), Colbeck et al. (2000) and others have presented evidence which confirms that companies increasingly expect graduates to be skilled in teamwork and group communication techniques. Indeed, a report published by the Association of Graduate Recruiters in 2006 asserted that many employers were ‘struggling’ to fill vacancies because of graduates’ inadequacies with regard to ‘teamworking, cultural awareness, leadership and communication skills’ (Taylor 2006, 7), implying that individuals who have obtained these competences through academic group work should command a premium in the labour market.

**Changing priorities among graduate recruiters**

There is evidence to suggest that UK employers are frequently disappointed with the lack of basic skills exhibited by the graduates they recruit. Alleged deficiencies include inadequate numeracy, poor oral and written communication, bad self-presentation and inadequate analysis skills (see Ellis 2000). Shepherd (2006) reported the results of a survey of university admissions tutors which concluded that ‘undergraduates were entering university less numerate, literate and knowledgeable than ever before’ (p. 1). A survey of 466 students completed by Mackenzie (2002) found that less than 3% of the sample had studied mathematics post-GCSE level, so that upon entering university the students had not practised their numeracy skills for at least two years. The possibility arises, therefore, that employers might increasingly be more concerned with ensuring that graduate recruits from vocational degrees have attained basic levels of numeracy and literacy than with requiring that newcomers have completed work placements. Since 2004, 43% of all UK 18- to 30-year-olds have been in higher education (DFES 2005) compared with 30% of this age group in 1999. This might have induced some firms to focus their graduate recruitment on pre-1992 institutions with academically excellent reputations. Mason et al. (2003) cited studies which concluded that many employers perceived the graduates of certain (old) universities to be of higher quality, even though their courses had contained neither a work placement nor an employability skills unit. Such employers were more likely to recruit from universities that demanded high A-level scores, ‘thus helping to perpetuate the idea of a graduate elite who possess a broader form of social and cultural capital than graduates from universities with non-traditional entrants that have specifically tried to develop employability skills’ (p. 5).

In general, the expansion in student numbers has been accompanied by a reduction in the average level of matriculation qualifications held by incoming undergraduates (especially among the post-1992 universities – see HESA 2004; UCAS 2006) and, according to critics, by a lowering of the average academic standard of British university graduates (see Shepherd 2006). Hence graduate recruiters might wish more and more to pay close attention to the class of degree that a person obtained at university, rather than to the type of vocational degree acquired and/or whether it included a work placement. Although (to the best of the authors’ knowledge) this matter has not been formally researched, it is undoubtedly the case that many advertisements for graduate jobs now specify that applicants must have at least an upper second class honours degree (see Bennett 2003). To the extent that this happens, it raises important issues for post-1992 universities where the proportion of students obtaining ‘good’ honours
degrees may be lower than in pre-1992 institutions (THES 1993–2006). For instance, in one of the authors’ home universities just 32% of graduates gained upper second or first class honours degrees in 2005, compared with an average of 79% in the ‘top 20’ English universities (89% in Oxford and Cambridge) (THES 2006). Is it the case that nowadays employers routinely place the possession of a good honours degree above the benefits supposedly obtained from a work placement? Degree class is known to be used by some employers (see Mason et al. 2003) as an indicator of a person’s potential to achieve in any occupational field, as opposed to their viewing degree class as little more than a graduate’s level of qualification at the point of recruitment. It is relevant to note in this connection the opinion of the Burgess Group that the existing British undergraduate degree classification system is ‘no longer fit for purpose’ and that ‘change in this sector is long overdue’ (Burgess 2007, 7). The Group recommended that academic transcripts be more meticulous and include ‘achievements of non-formal learning’. As a consequence, employers would be able to obtain a better picture of ‘prospective employees’ knowledge, skills and experience acquired through a wide range of higher education experiences’ (Burgess 2007, 34).

The study

The present study sought to explore contemporary attitudes amongst graduate recruiters towards various possible benefits for graduate employability that work placements allegedly confer on students undertaking vocational degrees. Additionally the investigation canvassed employers’ views on the ‘value added’ to a student’s prospects on graduation if the person had undertaken a work placement while on a vocational degree in a post-1992 university rather than in one of the older more traditional pre-1992 universities. The research also examined the questions of whether employers considered (1) term-time paid employment and jobs completed during vacations; and (2) experiences gained by doing large amounts of group work on a degree programme to represent employability training that is as good or nearly as good as that obtained from a formal work placement. Finally it queried whether the employers in the sample regarded the possession by a graduate of an upper second or first class honours degree as more valuable than the person having done a work placement.

Employers’ opinions vis-à-vis the relative weights they ascribed to certain characteristics of a specific graduate were established through a conjoint analysis. Four characteristics were considered: (1) whether a person had at least an upper second class honours vocational degree; (2) whether the individual had a degree from a pre-1992 university or from a post-1992 university; (3) whether an applicant’s degree did or did not incorporate a formal work placement, and (4) whether a vocational degree did or did not contain a substantial amount of group work. Combinations of these attributes sufficient to support a statistical analysis were generated via the Orthoplan procedure of the SPSS package (see below). Eight combinations emerged, as shown in section five of Appendix 1. The respondents were asked to rank the eight combinations of features in order of preference. Conjoint analysis is a technique that enables the researcher to measure an individual’s preferences for various characteristics of an entity (in the present context an applicant for a graduate position). Respondents are presented with a list of alternative collections of attributes associated with the entity and asked to rank the combinations. As any one combination will probably not contain all of the characteristics the respondent values most or least highly, the person is compelled to decide which attributes he or she regards as important and unimportant. Analysis of the person’s ranking decisions reveals the relative weights (‘part worths’) that the individual ascribes to each attribute. A part worth reflects the importance to the individual of a particular characteristic. Part worths may then be added to give the ‘total utility’ of a particular combination of attributes for each respondent. Thereafter, average part worth
values can be computed for the entire sample. The results are known as the ‘averaged importance’ levels of the various attributes as they indicate which attribute the group as a whole considers to be the most important, the next most important, and so on. The profiles of groups expressing certain sets of preferences may then be explored.

As the number of characteristics included in a conjoint analysis increases, so the total number of combinations to be considered becomes too large and demanding for the respondent. The SPSS Orthoplan procedure overcomes this problem by creating a parsimonious subset of all possible combinations that is just sufficient to enable part worths to be computed from the data. SPSS Orthoplan automatically generates a small set of combinations for presentation to respondents. The ranking of this restricted number of combinations produces enough information for the part worth calculations to take place. (The Orthoplan created by the SPSS conjoint software for the present study is reproduced in Appendix 1, section five.) SPSS then calculates part worths through a regression analysis that uses dummy variables coded at unity for each characteristic included in a particular combination and minus unity for characteristics that are not included. This ensures that the part worths sum to unity so that the relative importance of each can be compared.

The questionnaire

Employers’ views on relevant matters were examined through a questionnaire distributed to 900 private sector businesses. A summary of the questionnaire is given in Appendix 1. The document began with a general section covering firm size, industry sector, and whether the enterprise had experience of (1) employing graduates whose degrees had contained work placements; and (2) taking students for work placement periods. A further question asked whether the firm had a dedicated personnel or human resources management (HRM) department. This item was included on the grounds that a priori it seems reasonable to suppose that firms with such a department will be more likely to recognise the advantages (if they exist) to be had from recruiting graduates who have undertaken work placements. A professional HRM department might hold records on past situations involving these graduates and will inform and advise recruiting sections and managers accordingly. Issues concerning graduate recruitment may well be analysed in greater depth in a firm with an HRM department than in a business that does not have one.

Section two of the questionnaire contained items concerning the respondent’s views on the supposed advantages of work placements on vocational degrees (2[a] to [f] and 2[m]), followed by queries about the manager’s opinions vis-à-vis possible benefits for employability of ‘gap years’ and voluntary work, and of vocational degrees containing group work (2[j] to [l]). A final item in section two asked whether the firm would take into account a graduate applicant’s A-level or other pre-university entry grades when filling a graduate position. This query was included in line with previously mentioned comments in relation to the possibility that recruiters are increasingly disturbed by the levels of basic numeracy and literacy of many contemporary graduates. The third section explored in more detail the respondents’ views on specific benefits alleged to result from academic group work on vocational degrees. Section four examined the participants’ attitudes towards graduates with work placement experience and who were from pre-1992 universities rather than from post-1992 universities. Attitudes were explored with regard to a list of fundamental transferable skills that employers have been found to seek in graduate recruits, as shown in Appendix 1, 4(A) items (a) to (j). This list was taken from Bennett’s (2003) analysis of 1000 job advertisements for graduate positions appearing in the British press and electronic graduate recruitment databases over a two-year period. There is no consensus in the academic literature concerning which particular transferable personal skills should be
regarded as most and least important. Hence the list employed by the present study was deemed 
appropriate as it may represent a more objective assessment of the skills that employers actually 
desire in graduate recruits, as evidenced by firms specifying these skills in job advertisements. 
The fifth and final section of the questionnaire carried the eight combinations for the conjoint 
analysis.

Sampling frame

The questionnaire was mailed (together with a covering letter and a reply-paid envelope) to the 
‘Head of Recruitment’ in 900 businesses. Five hundred of the enterprises were graduate 
recruiters identified from advertisements posted on one or more of three graduate recruitment 
websites (prospects.ac.uk; hobsons.co.uk; milkround.co.uk). The other 400 firms were organi-
sations that had taken vocational sandwich course students for their work placements on their 
degrees at the home university of one of the authors. Thus, half the firms in the sampling 
frame were known to have participated in work experience programmes as employers, and 
were predicted therefore to be generally in favour of the practice. The remaining half repre-

tented firms that happened to be advertising for graduate staff during the period the data were 
collected (September and October 2006). The justification for contacting the 400 businesses 
known to have taken work placement students was twofold. First, the exercise provided a 
conveniently accessible reference group against which the responses of the 500 ‘regular’ firms 
could be compared. Second it fitted with the ethos of the investigation (which sought to ques-
tion whether previously claimed benefits of work placements were still valid in the current 
environment), in the sense that participants in enterprises that took sandwich students 
comprised ‘expert’ respondents where the assessment of the value of work experience 
placements was concerned. If, therefore, this particular collection of respondents expressed 
negative views on the contributions of sandwich employment periods (relative to other experi-
ences such as term-time paid jobs), this would represent a powerful indication that work 
placements were no longer worthwhile.

Ninety-three replies were received from the first half of the sampling frame (i.e. the general 
graduate recruiters), representing 18.5% of the organisations approached. These firms were large 
or average (median number of employees = 2400; mean = 9670) and only two did not have a 
dedicated HRM department. Respondents in just five of the enterprises stated that they had never 
employed a graduate who had completed a work placement, with five participants reporting that 
their companies had never taken students for work experience periods (these 12 included the two 
businesses without HRM departments and four of the five firms that had never employed a grad-
uate with work placement experience). Seventy-six replies were received from the businesses 
known to take work placement students (19%), and all of these had (as might be expected) hired 
sandwich course graduates as well as employing sandwich course students. Fourteen of these 
firms did not have HRM departments. The results from the two halves of the sampling frame 
were compared in relation to the major dimensions of the investigation; namely the perceived 
advantages of work placements (Appendix 1, section 2 items [a] to [f]), including their benefits 
for mature students (2[m]), opinions vis-à-vis the utility of group work (section 3), and attitudes 
regarding the skills of graduates from pre-1992 and post-1992 universities (section 4). The mean 
values of the individual items within these sections of the questionnaire for both groups of 
businesses were compared using t-tests and (non-parametric) Mann–Whitney U-tests. No 
meaningfully significant differences became evident from this exercise ($p < 0.05$), or from an 
examination of the average part worths arising from the conjoint analysis. Hence the two halves 
were combined to form a 169-strong sample. Businesses in the sample operated in a wide range 
of industry sectors, with no one sector predominating.
Results

Descriptive results

Employers’ attitudes towards work placements

In total, 67% of the responses from the main sample fell in the agree or strongly agree category of (i) Appendix 1, item 2(a) which asked whether, in general, the company in question preferred to recruit graduates whose vocational degree programmes had included work placements. Two-thirds of the replies to Appendix 1, item 2(f) regarding the belief that individuals from sandwich course degrees ‘fit into’ a firm more quickly and easily ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’. Work placements were not normally seen as being less valuable for mature students (item 2[m]), with just 17% of the participants agreeing or strongly agreeing with this proposition. Also, only a third of the sample agreed or strongly agreed that work placements were especially valuable for graduates recruited to work in specific functional positions (marketing, accounting, etc.) in a firm, compared with people hired to do general management work (item 2[c]). This latter outcome is compatible with the finding that just 29% of the respondents thought that sandwich course graduates required less training than other employees (2[e]).

Overwhelmingly the participants believed that paid work undertaken in term time and vacations improved a person’s eventual employability in a graduate position (87% agreed or strongly agreed with item 2[d]). However, only a minority (42%) agreed or strongly agreed that paid work of this nature provided experiences that were ‘just as valuable’ as those obtained during a formal work placement (2[b]). Some 36% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this proposition, with the remaining 24% of the responses falling in the neutral category. Concomitantly two-thirds of the participants agreed/strongly agreed that taking a gap year would improve an individual’s employability (2[g]), but just 6% thought that a gap year would develop employability skills that were as useful as those acquired on a sandwich course (2[h]). The same percentage applied vis-à-vis students’ voluntary activities (see 2[i]).

Perceived value of university group work

Group work was regarded as particularly valuable as a device for nurturing leadership and interpersonal skills (75% of the sample agreed/strongly agreed with item 3[a]), tolerance (69%, see 3[d]), and skills relating to negotiation and conflict resolution (78%, see 3[e]). These outcomes might explain why 55% of the respondents agreed/strongly agreed that their firms enquired about the extents to which job candidates’ degree programmes had included group work (2[k]) when recruiting for graduate positions. On the other hand, the above figures indicate that around one in four of the participants had reservations about the value of group work for developing key employability skills. Academic group work was not perceived to develop skills that were as useful as those acquired through a work placement (only 20% agreed/strongly agreed with item 2[j]), while 54% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. Also, just 18% of the sample agreed/strongly agreed that their firms placed a ‘higher value’ on a candidate for a graduate job whose degree had incorporated large amounts of group work (2[l]). Academic group work was not generally considered to improve a person’s ‘generic skills such as critical thinking’ (34%, see item 3[c]) or to generate experiences that mirror real-life business situations (41%, see 3[b]).

Pre-1992 versus post-1992 universities

There were few disparities in the average responses to the questionnaire items that involved opinions about the value added by work placements completed in pre- and post-1992 universities.
The percentage of the replies falling in the agree or strongly agree categories for all the items in section 4 of Appendix 1 varied from 33% to 44%, except for item 4A (h) concerning leadership skills, where the figure was 22%. This last percentage differed significantly ($p < 0.05$) from all the percentages for items within section 4B, which examined the respondents’ opinions concerning the employability skills of graduates from pre-1992 universities. Apart from 4A(h), responses in the disagree/strongly disagree options for the other items were all below 15% (and not significantly different from each other at the 0.05 level), leaving the ‘neutral’ category as an important residual within this particular section. It seems, therefore, that few of the respondents actively disagree with the notion that graduates of post-1992 universities who had completed a work placement were better equipped in all the areas listed in section 4A (except for 4A [(h)]) than were graduates of post-1992 institutions who had not undertaken a work placement. Exactly the same pattern emerged in relation to the comparison in section 4B of graduates of pre-1992 universities who had or had not completed a work placement. Section 4C asked the participants to indicate whether they thought that graduates of post-1992 university degrees that contained work placements were better equipped for employment than graduates of pre-1992 university degrees that did not have work placements. The outcomes were approximately the same as for sections 4A and 4B (indicating that the respondents did not normally regard the fact that a person had attended a post-1992 university as diminishing the value for employability of having completed a work placement), except for item 4C (e) concerning the possession of analytical skills and critical thinking. Here, just 19% of the responses fell in the agree/strongly agree categories (35% were in the disagree/strongly disagree divisions), implying that many of the respondents believed that a graduate of a pre-1992 institution who had not completed a sandwich course would tend to be better at analysis and critical thinking than someone from a post-1992 university who had done a work placement.

**Conjoint analysis**

Table 1 presents the results of the conjoint analysis. It can be seen from Table 1 that, when forced to express relative preferences for the various characteristics shown in the combinations listed in Appendix 1, section 5, the respondents heavily favoured individuals who had completed formal work placements as part of their undergraduate degrees. The next most important variable was whether a person possessed a ‘good’ honours degree (an individual with a 2.1 or higher was preferred). (It is relevant to note in this connection that 56% of the sample agreed or strongly

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<th>Averaged importance</th>
<th>Averaged utility</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 or lower</td>
<td></td>
<td>−0.111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the graduate’s degree contain a substantial amount of group work?</td>
<td>17.13</td>
<td>0.155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td>−0.155</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Correlations between observed and estimated preferences: Pearson’s $R = 0.88$ ($p = 0.001$), Kendall’s $\tau = 0.788$ ($p = 0.002$).
agreed that their companies took into consideration applicants A-level or other pre-university entry grades when recruiting for graduate positions – see Appendix 1, item 2 [n].) Class of degree was regarded as slightly (but at the 0.05 level not significantly) more important than the next graduate attribute favoured on average by the participants, i.e. the type of university attended. Graduates of pre-1992 institutions were preferred to people from post-1992 universities. The characteristic deemed least important on average by the respondents (yet still accounting for nearly a fifth of the total value of the average importance measure) was whether a graduate’s degree contained group work. (Programmes that had elements of group work were preferred to others.) The difference between the value of the averaged importance of this variable and the third-ranking graduate attribute (type of university) was statistically significant ($p = 0.05$).

To investigate further the features of the participants who ranked each of the four above-mentioned characteristics particularly highly, the conjoint output for each participant was examined and individuals whose conjoint importance scores fell in the top 25% of the ranges available for any one of the four characteristics were identified. Four binary variables were then created that assumed the value of one if a person had rated a certain characteristic (e.g. degree class) in the top quarter of the importance spectrum, and zero otherwise. The four binary variables were then correlated with other dimensions of the analysis. Three significant relationships were discerned from this exercise. First, respondents who regarded attendance at a pre-1992 university as being very important tended to work in smaller firms (Kendall’s Tau [KT] = 0.471, $p = 0.05$). Second, people who saw work placements as especially important were inclined to believe that recruits who had completed formal work placements required less training (KT = 0.420, $p = 0.05$) (Appendix 1, item 2[e]). Third (and as might be expected), participants who regarded a graduate’s class of degree as being highly important were more likely than others to report that their firms looked at the A-level or other university entry qualifications held by candidates for graduate positions (KT = 0.403, $p = 0.05$) (item 2[n]).

**Conclusion**

This study set out to establish whether a sample of British firms still valued graduate recruits who had completed formal work placements as part of their undergraduate vocational degree programmes, given the changes in the UK higher education environment (older students, extensive involvement in paid term-time employment, etc.) that have taken place in recent years. Specifically it examined how important undergraduate work placements were perceived to be by graduate recruiters relative to other factors (e.g. the possession of a ‘good’ honours degree or a vocational qualification from a ‘traditional’ pre-1992 university). It emerged that, on the whole, the respondents continued to regard formal work placements favourably, and that they recognised their usefulness for developing a number of critical employability skills. Work placements were seen as being as advantageous for graduates of pre-1992 universities as for people who attended post-1992 institutions. On average the participants held positive views vis-à-vis the work experience that students acquired through undertaking paid employment during term-time vacations. However, the experiences gained via term-time and vacation jobs were not deemed to be as valuable as those obtained through a formal work placement included in a degree programme.

Academic group work within vocational undergraduate courses was generally regarded as useful, especially for developing interpersonal and leadership skills, tolerance of others, and competences relating to conflict resolution and negotiation. The conjoint analysis revealed that graduates with 2.1 or first class honours degrees and who had attended pre-1992 universities tended to be preferred to others, although the completion of a formal work placement was
considered a far more important consideration than either of these factors. Moreover, the difference between the average importance attributed on the one hand to having a good honours degree and, on the other, to having graduated from a pre-1992 university was not significant. This could be interpreted to mean that a graduate of a post-1992 university who completed a work placement, and who obtained a good honours degree from that university, can compete effectively in the graduate labour market.

From 2006 onwards British undergraduates have been required to pay a ‘top up’ fee of (at the time of writing) £3000 a year. At least part of this (£1500 in the authors’ own universities) is payable while a student is on work placement. The extra year needed to complete a sandwich degree containing a work placement will add significantly to the amount of debt that a student incurs over the course of an undergraduate programme. Hence the question arises as to whether the work experience gained during the placement year is really worthwhile relative to the fees payable. According to Shepherd (1998a), university campuses are at least as effective in providing students with generic skills as are workplace environments. Indeed, Shepherd (1998a) continued, many businesses employ work placement students simply to obtain unpaid or cheap labour for specific projects (as may occur in relation to the employment of young people generally). The supervision of students at the place of work could be poor and the training provided may be superficial. Workplaces might be ‘biased environments’ for the development of generic skills, Shepherd (1998a, 135) concluded, and even if generic skills were acquired it was unlikely that students would have the opportunity to reflect upon them. Rothman (2003) also noted how placements could be repetitive and unchallenging, and hence contribute to negative experiences with potentially detrimental consequences for the perceptions of the value of work placements.

The outcomes to the present study, however, suggest strongly that the additional fees that students have to pay on sandwich courses are worthwhile given that employers seemingly continue to value such courses highly.

The outcomes to the investigation imply the need for aggressive promotion of sandwich course vocational degrees by universities, emphasising the high level of esteem in which they are held by employers and the advantages they bestow on graduates seeking jobs. Demand for places on sandwich degrees has declined substantially in recent years (see above), yet the employability skills and perspectives they develop in the students who undertake them continue to be recognised and valued by employers. There is no evidence from the present study to suggest that there exist any educational or vocational grounds to justify the reduction of sandwich course provision. Another implication of the findings is that academic group work should be nurtured and extended by universities that wish to improve their graduates’ employment prospects. A third implication follows from the observation that, on average, the participants in the investigation believed that graduates of pre-1992 universities were better at analysis and critical thinking than their post-1992 university graduate counterparts. This suggests that educational managers in post-1992 institutions need to explore possibilities for developing these competences within their sandwich course offerings.

Further research would be worthwhile into how academic group work on vocational degrees might better mirror employment environments given that 54% of the respondents believed that group work did not develop skills that were as useful for employability as those acquired during a work placement. The firms in the sample were clearly interested in the academic group work experiences of candidates for graduate positions, as 55% enquired about this matter when recruiting graduate staff. It would be interesting to discover the specific aspects of applicants’ group work histories that graduate recruiters typically ask about, and then to examine how dimensions of group work that firms find attractive might be emphasised in academic group work activities. Another area that is worthy of further investigation is the relationship between sandwich course placements and the introduction across UK higher education of university
employability programmes. Numerous studies have noted that strong disciplinary knowledge of itself rarely helps a fresh graduate obtain a career-oriented job (see Crebert et al. 2004 for details of relevant literature). Rather, ‘graduate attributes’ are commonly perceived as the key to success in gaining employment. Today, as a matter of course, British universities seek to inculcate in their students graduate attributes which, while learned in the classroom, are easily transferred to the workplace (ABS 1999; Athiyaman 2001). A study conducted for HEFCE by Mason et al. (2003) found widespread interest in developing the employability of graduates amongst all British universities, although there was a significant disparity of opinion between pre- and post-1992 universities with regard to the appropriate ‘employability-enhancing’ initiatives and experiences that were required. Post-1992 universities tended to emphasise the provision of specific transferable skills that were directly applicable within employment situations. Conversely the more traditional pre-1992 universities often focused on programmes designed to convert academic competences acquired within existing courses into occupationally relevant skills. How does the quality of the employability skills developed by such programmes compare with the employability skills acquired during sandwich placements?

The study did not examine differences in employers’ perceptions of the value of group work with respect to the specific subject of a person’s vocational degree (accountancy, engineering, etc.) or wider disciplinary area (humanities, arts, science, and so on). It would be interesting to examine employers’ perceptions of the value of group work for the employability of graduates of, for example, history of art or English literature degrees that, by their very nature, are not vocationally orientated. Employers’ views might vary depending on the general genre of degree subject an individual is studying.

References


Appendix 1: The questionnaire

1. About your firm

(a) Approximately how many people does your firm employ? (Please insert) ___________________.

(b) In which broad industry sector is your firm mainly involved (e.g. manufacturing, financial services, retailing)? (Please insert) __________________________________________________.

(c) Does your firm have its own Personnel or HRM Department? (Please circle) Yes/No.

(d) Has your firm ever hired graduates with degrees that contained work placements (e.g. ‘sandwich course’ degrees)? (Please circle) Yes/No.

(e) Does your firm take students for their work placement periods on ‘sandwich course’ degrees or for part time work placements organised by a university? (Please circle) Yes/No.

2. General

Please indicate the strength of your agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements by marking the appropriate box. (Five-point scales: 5 = Strongly Agree; 1 = Strongly Disagree).

(a) We definitely prefer to recruit graduates whose degrees included a work placement organised by a university as part of a degree programme.

(b) The work experience that a student obtains through part-time paid employment during term time, in conjunction with the paid jobs the person does during vacations, provides the student with work experiences which are just as valuable as those he or she would obtain through a work placement included in a degree programme.

(c) Work placements are more valuable for people who will occupy specific functional positions in a firm than for people who will occupy generalist management positions.

(d) The skills a student acquires through working in paid employment during term time and university vacations improve his or her employability in a graduate position.

(e) Recruits with a university degree who have completed work placements as part of their university degree require less training.

(f) Recruits with a university degree who have completed formal work placements as part of their university degree fit into the firm more quickly and easily.

(g) The personal skills that an individual acquires during a ‘gap year’ spent between school and university improve his or her employability in a graduate position.

(h) The personal skills an individual acquires during a gap year are just as useful for his or her employability in a graduate position as the skills acquired during a formal work placement.

(i) The personal skills an individual acquires while undertaking voluntary activities (e.g. in the local community or in clubs or societies) are just as useful for his or her employability in a graduate position as the skills acquired during a formal work placement.

(j) A student whose degree included large amounts of group work (i.e. academic projects on which students collaborate in teams and receive a common mark) is likely to have acquired skills that are just as useful for his or her employability in a graduate position as the skills acquired during a formal work placement.

(k) When recruiting people for graduate positions this firm enquires about the extents to which their degree programmes included group work.

(l) We place a higher value on a candidate for a graduate position whose degree included large amounts of group work than we place on a candidate whose degree did not include group work.

(m) Work placements organised by a university as part of a degree programme are less valuable for mature students (say those beginning their studies when over the age of 22 years) than for younger students.

(n) Irrespective of the sort or class of degree that a person obtains, we take account of the individual’s A-level or other pre-university entry grades when recruiting for graduate positions.

3. Degrees containing substantial amounts of group work

Please indicate the strength of your agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements by marking the appropriate box. (Five-point scales: 5 = Strongly Agree; 1 = Strongly Disagree).
A student whose degree contained a very large amount of group work:

(a) will have developed better leadership, interpersonal and communication skills than a student whose degree did not include group work
(b) is likely to have experienced situations that mirror real-life business activities
(c) is likely to possess better generic skills such as critical thinking than a student whose degree did not include group work
(d) will have developed greater tolerance for people of different cultures, ethnicities and ages than a student whose degree did not include group work
(e) is likely to possess better negotiation and conflict resolution skills than a student whose degree did not include group work.

4. Old and new universities

A. The following section examines your attitudes towards graduates from post-1992 universities (i.e. the polytechnics that were converted into universities in 1992) and who have completed sandwich course work placements.

Please indicate the strength of your agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements by marking the appropriate box. (Five-point scales: 5 = Strongly Agree; 1 = Strongly Disagree).

Graduates from post-1992 universities who completed a work placement during their degree are better equipped than graduates from post-1992 universities who did not complete a work placement, in relation to the following:

(a) Communication/presentation skills
(b) Organisation skills
(c) Teamworking skills
(d) Personal motivation to succeed in a job
(e) Analytical skills and critical thinking
(f) Personal self-confidence
(g) Ability to exercise initiative
(h) Leadership skills
(i) Personal adaptability / flexibility
(j) Negotiation and conflict resolution skills.

B. This section asked the same questions as 4A above but in relation to graduates of pre-1992 universities (i.e. the older universities that existed before the conversion of polytechnics into universities in 1992).

C. The next section asked the respondent to compare graduates from post-1992 universities who HAD completed a sandwich course work placement degree with graduates from pre-1992 universities who HAD NOT completed a work placement. The item was worded:

'Graduates in a particular discipline (e.g. marketing or accountancy) from post-1992 universities who completed a work placement during their degree are better equipped than graduates of the same subject from pre-1992 universities who did NOT complete a work placement in relation to the following. '

This was followed by the list of transferable skills appearing in 4A.

5. Characteristics of candidates

Suppose you were recruiting for a graduate position and were faced with a set of candidates possessing the following characteristics. Other things being equal, please rank the candidates in order of preference from 1 to 8. Please write the number 1 alongside your most preferred candidate, the number 2 alongside the second choice, and so on.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>University Type</th>
<th>Placement Type</th>
<th>Group Work Type</th>
<th>Degree Class</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>Has degree from a <strong>pre-1992</strong> university</td>
<td>Has NOT completed a formal work placement</td>
<td>Degree did NOT contain group work</td>
<td>Has a 2.1 or 1st class honours degree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>Has degree from a <strong>post-1992</strong> university</td>
<td>Has NOT completed a formal work placement</td>
<td>Degree did contain group work</td>
<td>Has a class of degree lower than a 2.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>Has degree from a <strong>post-1992</strong> university</td>
<td>Has NOT completed a formal work placement</td>
<td>Degree did NOT contain group work</td>
<td>Has a 2.1 or 1st class honours degree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>Has degree from a <strong>post-1992</strong> university</td>
<td>Has completed a formal work placement</td>
<td>Degree did contain group work</td>
<td>Has a class of degree lower than a 2.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth</td>
<td>Has degree from a <strong>pre-1992</strong> university</td>
<td>Has NOT completed a formal work placement</td>
<td>Degree did contain group work</td>
<td>Has a class of degree lower than a 2.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth</td>
<td>Has degree from a <strong>post-1992</strong> university</td>
<td>Has completed a formal work placement</td>
<td>Degree did contain group work</td>
<td>Has a 2.1 or 1st class honours degree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh</td>
<td>Has degree from a <strong>pre-1992</strong> university</td>
<td>Has completed a formal work placement</td>
<td>Degree did NOT contain group work</td>
<td>Has a class of degree lower than a 2.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eighth</td>
<td>Has degree from a <strong>pre-1992</strong> university</td>
<td>Has completed a formal work placement</td>
<td>Degree did contain group work</td>
<td>Has a 2.1 or 1st class honours degree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>