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Engaging with Employers in Economic Downturn

Lyndsey El Amoud
University College Cork, l.elamoud@ucc.ie

Joan Buckley
University College Cork

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Engaging with Employers in Economic Downturn

Ms. Lyndsey El Amoud, Dr. Joan Buckley

University College Cork[1]

Abstract

There has been an increasing focus on personal transferable skills by universities (Albrecht and Sack 2000). This has led to considerable growth in the number of placement programmes in undergraduate courses in Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). As noted by Paisey and Paisey (2009) relatively little research has been carried out in this domain. This paper explores the state of non-clinical placement programmes in third level institutes in Ireland. It presents the results of the first comprehensive survey of placement in Irish. The survey reveals the scale and scope of work placement programmes in undergraduate courses in Ireland. With more than three hundred courses incorporated into this survey, it is one of the most wide-ranging studies to ever have been conducted in this field.

This paper's discussion will present contextual information on the number of third level students involved in placement programmes across the country and the types of courses in Irish HEIs (by level and discipline) which include a work placement element in their core structure. It presents several of the key obstacles facing undergraduate work placement programmes and their managers as a result of the current changes in the global economic environment. The paper presents and considers the conflicting imperatives facing employers who may previously have been enthusiastic partners in work placement programmes. It also considers the impact and likely trajectory of the paid/non-paid placement debate, and examines some of the combination models being considered at present.

Finally, this paper will demonstrate how this form of engagement between education and industry can be mutually beneficial for all key stakeholders involved in work placement programmes, including employers, HEIs and third level students (Richardson and Blakeney 1998). The wide range of benefits – in particular benefits to teaching and learning - which placement programmes can generate for each of these stakeholders will be analysed.

Address for Correspondence:

Ms. Lyndsey El Amoud, Office of the Vice President for Teaching and Learning, University College Cork, Ireland. Tel.: +353-879396644 E-mail: l.elamoud@ucc.ie

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Introduction

Work placement programmes have been incorporated into undergraduate courses in many higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world for countless decades. For example, in the home institution of this paper's authors, work placement has featured in academic courses since as far back as the mid-nineteenth century when medical teaching commenced in that particular university. Although initially work placement was largely confined to the realm of clinical courses such as medicine and nursing in many HEIs, more recently it has been extended across most academic disciplines. This development is partly due to the increasing focus on personal transferable skills by universities (Albrecht and Sack 2000). As a result of this renewed focus on student employability, hundreds of thousands of students across the globe - from a wide variety of academic backgrounds - currently take part in work placement programmes as part of their undergraduate education. In the United States, the idea of formalised cooperative education can be traced back to 1906 when Dean Herman Schneider of the University of Cincinnati (UC) founded the first cooperative education programme for engineering students in an effort to extend student learning beyond the classroom.[2] More than a century later, in the US there are approximately six hundred co-op programmes with 241,000 students participating in them annually (University of Cincinnati). In Canada, the concept of cooperative education was launched in 1957 in the institutional predecessor to the University of Waterloo. Today, the Canadian Association for Cooperative Education represents more than eighty Canadian HEIs with over eighty thousand co-op students in its mission 'to foster and advance post-secondary co-operative education in Canada' (Canadian Association for Cooperative Education). Little (2007) reported that work placement was a very common course component across many European countries with almost 55 per cent of graduates in the eleven countries she studied having participated in a work placement or internship during the course of their undergraduate education.[3] Indeed, as placement programmes have multiplied in HEIs across the world, so too have they grown in prevalence in Ireland. However, relatively little research has been carried out in this domain, as noted by Paisey and Paisey (2009).

[2] According to the US National Commission for Cooperative Education, cooperative education is defined as 'a structured educational strategy integrating classroom studies with learning through productive work experiences in a field related to a student's academic or career goals.'

[3] UK 29%; Italy 21%; Spain 56%; France 72%; Austria 45%; Germany 80%; Netherlands 86%; Finland 79%; Norway 59%; Czech Republic 36%; Switzerland 43%.

This paper addresses this gap by presenting the results of a national survey on placement, and exploring the state of placement programmes in third level institutes in Ireland in the current economic environment. The paper begins with an overview of the growing need for graduates to acquire improved employability skills, which has become even more relevant in the current economic downturn. It will also review the existing literature on the benefits of placement for students, employers and higher education institutions. The results of the national survey on placement which will provide contextual information on the number of third level students involved in placement programmes across the country and the types of courses in Irish HEIs (by level and discipline) which include a work placement element in their core structure. Following this quantitative contextual information, this paper will present the results of two large-scale consultations with academic and administrative staff engaged in placement programmes across the Irish HEI sector. The key issues relating to placement as perceived by those engaged in placing students will be presented along with their suggestions for resolving problems. The final section of the paper will present our conclusions and recommendations for practice and further research.

The Need for Improved Employability Skills

For more than a decade, the European Union has been working - through the Bologna Process - toward the creation of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), with increased graduate employability being one of the main goals to be achieved. According to the Bologna Follow-up Group, 'the role of higher education in this context is to equip students with skills and attributes (knowledge, attitudes and behaviours) that individuals need in the workplace and that employers require ... At the end of a course, students will thus have an in-depth knowledge of their subject as well as generic employability skills' (Bologna Process). The need for improved employability skills is also highlighted in recent research conducted by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). Its 2009 survey on education and skills[4] reported that 78 per cent of respondents said employability skills were one of the most important factors when recruiting graduates (CBI 2009: 11). When the same survey asked employers what areas universities should prioritise over the coming years, 82 per cent chose 'improving students' employability skills', suggesting this should be a key focus for universities (CBI 2009: 7). Indeed, according to Richard Lambert, Director General of the CBI,

[4] This survey was responded to by 581 employers, who collectively employ over 2.5 million people in Britain.

> The recession – and the resulting increase in competition for jobs – throws into sharper focus the imperative for graduates to have the attributes to succeed in the workplace. In addition to acquiring the strong academic and technical knowledge required for many roles, our graduates and postgraduates also need the employability skills and positive attitude that employers value in every new recruit (CBI 2009:2).

The types of generic skills falling under the broad umbrella term of *employability* vary slightly in the literature on this theme, but there is generally some common ground. For example, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2009) identifies 'teamworking, communication, active listing, an interest in learning, problem solving, numeracy, literacy and taking criticism as the employability competences which make the difference between being good at a subject and being good at a job' (Hall, Higson and Bullivant 2009: 5). The collaborative MISLEM project which involved partner HEIs from five European countries identified a framework of eight generic 'soft' competences which are considered to be important to employers when assessing the employability of graduates, namely communication skills; team-working and relationship building skills; self and time management skills; ability to see the bigger picture; influencing and persuading abilities; problem-solving abilities; leadership abilities; and presentation skills (Andrews and Higson 2007 cited in Hall, Higson and Bullivant 2009: 5/6). Research carried out in 2001 by the Business Council of Australia (BCA) and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) also identified eight key employability skills: communication; teamwork; problem solving; self-management; planning and organising; technology; life-long learning; initiative and enterprise skills (Precision Consultancy 2007: 10). However, perhaps the most comprehensive list of transferable skills was provided by the Tuning Project which was set up in 2000 with the aim of linking the political objectives of the Bologna Process to the higher educational sector in Europe. It has highlighted the fact that 'time and attention should be devoted to the development of generic competences or transferable skills' and it identifies thirty key skills in this context.[5] The Tuning Project skills list includes and expands on the

[5] Tuning Project skills list: capacity for analysis and synthesis; capacity for applying knowledge in practice; planning and time management; basic general knowledge in the field of study; grounding in basic knowledge of the profession in practice; oral and written communication in your native language; knowledge of a second language; elementary computing skills; research skills; capacity to learn; information management skills; critical and self-critical abilities; capacity to adapt to new situations; capacity for generating new ideas; problem solving; decision-making; teamwork; interpersonal skills; leadership; ability to work in an interdisciplinary team; ability to communicate with non-experts; appreciation of diversity and multiculturality; ability to work in an international context; understanding of cultures and customs of other countries; ability to work autonomously; project design and management; initiative and entrepreneurial spirit; ethical commitment; concern for quality; and will to succeed.

skills identified by other projects/papers and adds additional skills in the area of internationalisation – both language capacity-related and cultural skills.

Since this focus on employability has increased over the past decade, numerous groups and commentators have examined ways of integrating the development of employability skills into undergraduate curricula. One of the key ways of doing this is the expansion of work placement programmes. Indeed, in late 2008, the Bologna Working Group on Employability presented their update to the Bologna Seminar in Luxembourg which clearly stated that 'higher education institutions and employers need to work together to identify ways in which courses and programmes of study can offer students the opportunity to develop and define for themselves employability skills', and the group thus suggested that there should be 'an increased focus on providing work placements as part of courses' (Working Group on Employability 2008). Sam Laidlaw, Chairman of the CBI Higher Education Task Force, concurs with this assessment, stating,

> The importance of employability skills is now greater than ever in the current economic climate. Work placements are one way of providing a means by which these skills can be attained. …. In order to be well prepared for the upturn, we need to ensure that we are producing graduates with higher level skills and the employability skills which employers value in order to support the economy and meet the needs of business (CBI 2009:4).

Multiple Benefits of Placement

As discussed in the previous pages, there has been an increase in emphasis on employability skills as a significant outcome from third-level education. It is generally agreed that placement is beneficial – not alone to students, but to employers and home higher education institutions as well.

Student Benefits

With regard to the students, who are arguably the most important stakeholders in this process, the benefits of participating in work placement programmes are considerable. In terms of the students' learning while on placement, there is a large body of research which highlights the benefits of experiential learning, which according to Toncar and Cudmore (2000:54) 'allows students to become active participants in their own education.' According to Coleman (1976, cited in Toncar and Cudmore 2000:54), 'experiential learning complements classroom learning and such methods not only increase the motivation of the learner but also improve long-term retention of material and lead to a greater sense of self-accomplishment.' Parilla and Hesser (1998, cited in Toncar and Cudmore 2000:54) argue that

this form of learning 'enables students to comprehend previously learned material in new and different ways, thereby enriching previously learned lessons and grounding them in reality.' Fundamentally, experiential learning gives students the opportunity to integrate theory and practise in their chosen field by bringing their classroom learning into the real world. This experience then allows them to gain a deeper understanding of their academic work which in turn can improve their academic performance upon their return to the classroom.

There is mounting empirical evidence that suggests that placement students perform better academically than non-placement students (Lucas and Tan 2007). For example, in a study of almost 200 students from the University of the West of England, Surridge (2009: 482) reported that 'students who go on placement achieve significantly better final-year marks - graduate placement students gained 3.6 per cent more than non-placement students ... hence placement can have a major impact making the difference between a first and upper second, upper and lower second.' Mandilaras' (2004) comparative analysis of 124 placement and non-placement students indicated that 'there is a significant positive relationship between placement and academic attainment ... The probability of obtaining a higher degree class is positively affected by the decision of the student to go on professional placement. This result is significant at the 5% level.' This research also reported that 'opting to do the professional placement increases the likelihood of an upper-second-class degree by 30 percentage points. The probability of obtaining a lower second is also lower for a student who has been on industrial placement (69% for a non-placement student compared to 39% for a placement student).' Gomez, Lush and Clements (2004: 378) concluded that 'students taking a sandwich placement exhibit improved academic performance in their final year – on average, placement students will gain an advantage of nearly 4%.'

Research has also been conducted on the importance of skills acquisition for placement students. An Australian survey found that 'a high percentage (82.5%) of graduates recognized the opportunities offered during work placement for skills development' (Crebert et al 2004:155). The study also reported 'a correlation between the graduates' experience of work placement and the relative ease with which they made the transition from university to employment ... [as] there was a strong perception (74.2%) that the skills developed during work placement had made a significant contribution to the graduates' subsequent career advancement' (Crebert et al 2004:156).

Indeed, in terms of career success, research from the US suggests that students who completed internships during their undergraduate degree programme fared better in the world

of work upon graduation than non-intern graduates. Reasons for this include interns having a greater sense of career direction as they had the opportunity to test drive a career during their internships, they gained exposure to corporate culture and work habits, and they developed valuable personal and professional networking contacts (Toncar and Cudrmore 2000:59). Gault, Redington and Schlager (2000:50) recounted how interns reported receiving greater entry-level compensation than non-interns, with starting salaries averaging 9.23% higher than non-interns, while the length of time it took interns to obtain their first job was also significantly shorter than for non-interns.

Work placement also impacts on students' personal development and growth. They often develop more self-confidence and self-awareness as a result of their experiences which can then bring about a renewed sense of maturity and responsibility. They learn to see the world in new ways and can become more open-minded and compassionate. Their experience in the workplace may cement their career aspirations and bring about a new sense of ambition, commitment and purpose (Toncar and Cudmore 2000; Duignan 2003; Gomez, Lush and Clements 2004; Bennett et al 2008; Gibson and Busby 2009.) Thus it can be concluded that work placement offers students significant benefits in terms of their academic performance, employability and overall personal development which all contribute to increasing their labour-market value.

Employer Benefits

There are also a number of important benefits to be reaped by employers who engage in work placement programmes. Work placement offers employers the opportunity to assess potential employees before awarding them longer-term contracts which can prove to be a very cost effective recruitment strategy. As Gault, Redington and Schlager (2000: 52) outline, such programmes can provide employers with 'a known pool of high-quality employees at a significant savings in recruitment costs'. Employers can then gain from hiring from this pool because the graduates they take on should possess more realistic expectations of employment situations (Arnold et al 1999 cited in Bennett et al 2008), be less likely to experience entry or reality shock on starting a full-time job (Callanan and Benzing 2004 cited in Bennett et al 2008), require less training (Leslie and Richardson 2000 cited in Bennett et al 2008), and be more ambitious (Callanan and Benzing 2004 cited in Bennett et al 2008) and motivated (Leslie and Richardson 2000 cited in Bennett et al 2008). According to Beard (2007:208), employers have also reported 'lower turnover rates for college hires who have participated in an internship or cooperative education assignment in contrast to college hires who have not

completed these experiential learning activities.' It is therefore not surprising that in a recent survey of 169 employers, 67 per cent of respondents stated that 'in general, they preferred to recruit graduates whose vocational degree programmes had included work placements' (Bennett et al 2008:113). Another UK survey of industry placement partners revealed that 69 per cent of placement students were offered graduate jobs, 80 per cent of employers recruited placement students with the primary aim of attracting them back to permanent jobs, and 40 per cent of annual graduate intake from these employers consisted of former placement students (University of Manchester and UMIST 2004 cited in ASET). A similar study carried out by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2010), which surveyed 235 employers from twenty industries across the US, reported that 83 per cent of respondents cited the aim 'to feed their full-time hiring programme' as the primary focus of their internship program, while nearly 80 per cent identified this as the primary focus of their co-op program. Of the students hired by these employers from the graduating class of 2009, 44.6 per cent came from employers' internship programs and 34.9 per cent came from their co-op programs (National Association of Colleges and Employers 2010).

Employers can also benefit from the input of fresh ideas and innovations from motivated students. According to ASET (the UK Placement and Employability Professionals' Body), 'employers can benefit from an enthusiastic staff member, fresh from two years undergraduate study, who can often be targeted at specific short to medium term projects. The student comes equipped with specific skills as well as an up-to-date overview of the industry's developments and should become fully productive at an early stage.' A 2002 study carried out by a New Zealand HEI with its industry partners concluded that '90 per cent of those surveyed cited energy and enthusiasm alongside a new perspective offered by the student joining their organization as the major benefit' of participating in work placement programmes (Ferkins 2002:32). Employers can then utilise these enthusiastic students to address short-term company needs such as covering staff leave, helping out at busy periods or carrying out work which may be too time-consuming for their own staff to complete, all of which can improve their companies' productivity. This theme was highlighted in Ferkins' (2002:32) study of New Zealand employers who considered 'the accomplishment of important projects undertaken by the student that may not otherwise have been completed ... [as] "value-added" work for the organization.'

Finally, engaging in work placement programmes affords industry the opportunity to live up to its corporate social responsibility. The majority of organisations studied by Ferkins

(2002:32) ‘emphasized the “feel-good” factor in being able to “give something back”’. This in turn can generate goodwill within the academic community which can lead to further collaboration between industry and academia. This can help industry develop an ‘increased awareness of current academic developments in the particular discipline’, while also having the opportunity ‘to make a positive contribution towards the provision of a high quality work force for the future ... [through making] known to the academic community views and requirements regarding higher education’ (ASET).

Benefits for Higher Education Institutions

The other stakeholder in the work placement process is the HEI involved, as placement programmes also offer significant benefits to the academic community. Firstly, placement greatly contributes to the overall education and employability of students which is one of the ultimate goals of higher education. A work placement can inculcate new employability skills and reinforce the application of vocational techniques learned in the classroom (Gault, Redington, and Schlager 2000 cited in Bennett et al 2006:106). As mentioned previously, placements can also improve the academic performance, overall degree attainment and career success of students which in turn reflects well on their host institutions and may contribute to building the reputation of its courses and increase its attractiveness for potential applicants.

Through placement, HEIs have the benefit of testing their course material and ensuring that what they are teaching students is relevant to industry. As McGinn (1999:95) highlights, placements also provide ‘the university sector with an important feedback system of channelling education needs into the design and adaptation of course curricula and structures.’ Such 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 cited in Bennett et al 2006:106). This then helps ‘academic institutions provide graduates with the qualities that employers have informed that they require’ (ASET).

HEIs can also benefit from improved collaboration with industry as a result of placement programmes. For instance, work placements afford academics the opportunity to maintain contact with ‘real world’ developments and new technological innovations so that they can remain abreast of what is happening in their field. According to Gault, Redington and Schlager (2000:52), internship programmes also ‘offer tremendous potential for improving the relationship between the university and the business community. Training and

other business partnerships forged between universities and employers may serve as a catalyst for garnering new sources of external funding.' Indeed, there are numerous possible collaborations that can grow from placement partnerships between industry and academia.

Irish Work Placement Survey

While work placement has long since been incorporated into many undergraduate programmes in Ireland, there is a significant lack of research in this area. In an effort to quantify the level of undergraduate work placement programmes in Irish HEIs, this paper reports on the first comprehensive national survey on undergraduate work placements which was carried out over a period of several months between late 2009 and early 2010. At the outset a decision was taken to exclude clinical courses which included placement since in many cases the placement element of the programmes is a mandatory requirement by accrediting bodies (and thus not an elective pedagogy) and also the employer relationship is significantly different.[6] The exclusion of the clinical placements means that the figures presented here are representative of all non-clinical HEI programmes in the Republic of Ireland.

The design of this project was relatively simple. The first step was to examine the online course catalogues of all of Ireland's HEIs in order to compile a list of undergraduate courses which included work placement. A short survey was sent out to the placement or course coordinator for each of the courses identified. This survey comprised of seven questions as follows:

1. Approximately how many students per year complete work placement as part of this course?
2. Is placement a compulsory or optional element of this course?
3. How long are students on placement?
4. In what year of the course does placement take place?
5. Are placements generally paid or unpaid?
6. How many credits are awarded to the placement module?
7. How are placements assessed?

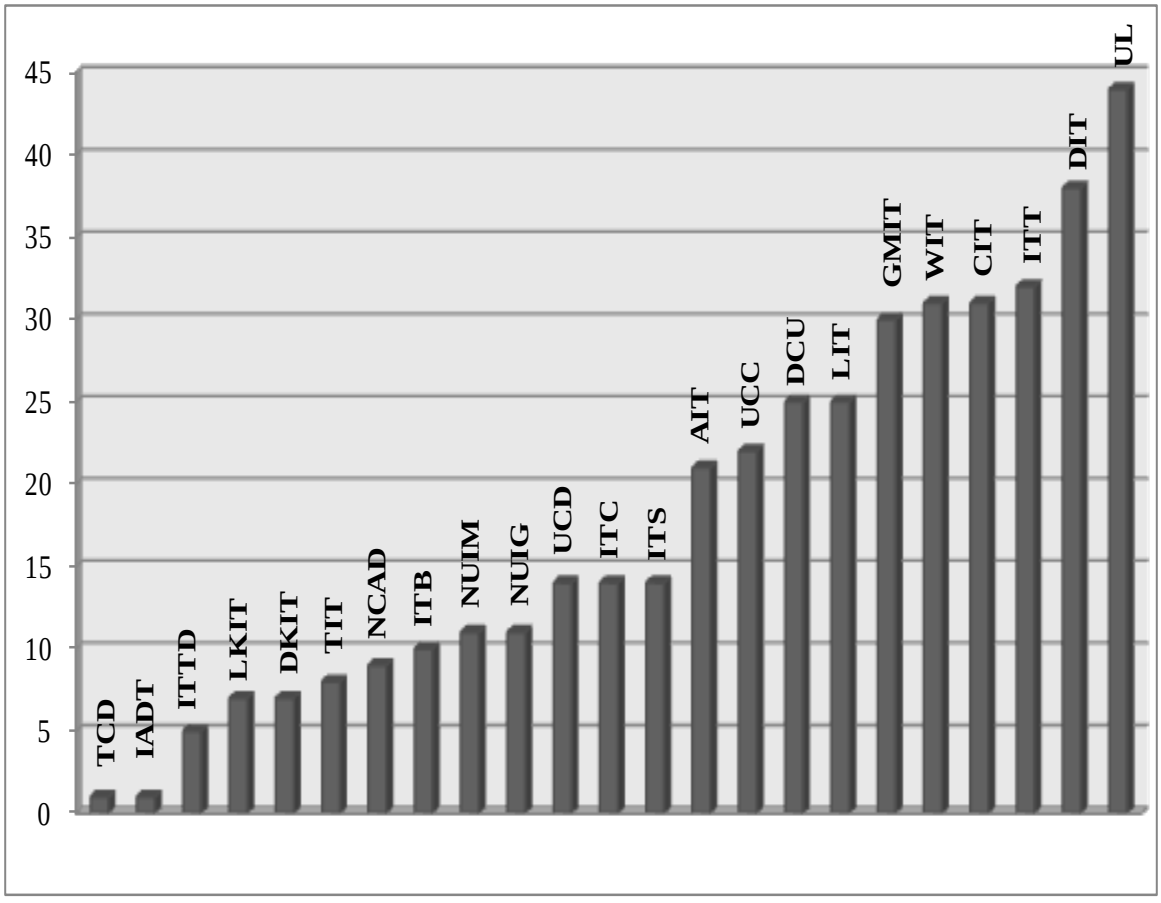
This data was then collated and analysed. The remainder of this section of the paper will present the results obtained from this research, which include: the number of courses in Irish HEIs which include a work placement element; the number of undergraduate students at Irish

[6] The nature of the employer-institution relationship is generally different as there is typically a higher mutual dependency between HEIs and among employers in these sectors.

HEIs involved in work placement; and the design of work placement programmes in Irish HEIs.

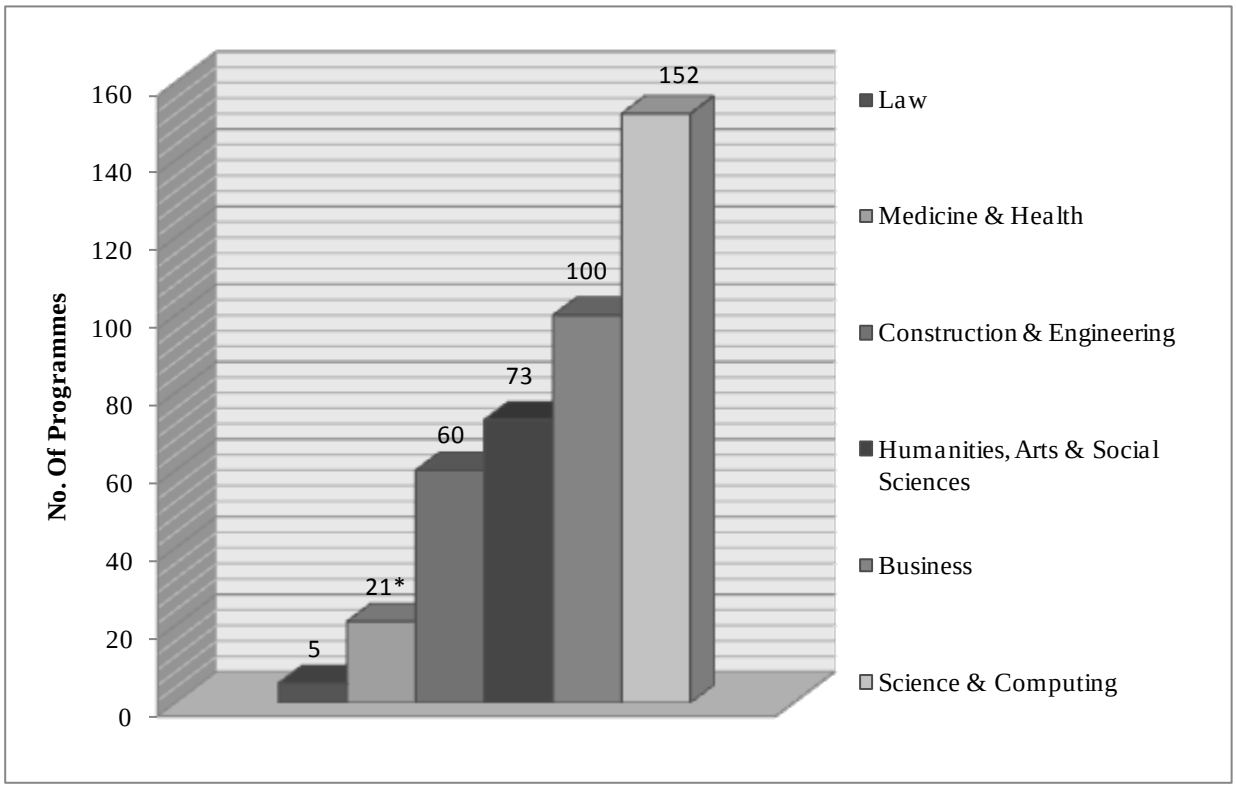
411 courses were identified which include a work placement element from 23 HEIs around the country. Figure 1 below details the spread of these 411 courses across the 23 HEIs. As this graph demonstrates, there is a huge variance between the HEIs in the amount of programmes which include work placements. It is important, however, to remember that this profile is not entirely representative due to the exclusion of clinical placements. If such placements were to be included, UCC's figures, for example, would be extended by an extra seven courses to include programmes such as medicine, dentistry, nursing, etc. The profile presented in this graph is also likely to change over the next few years, as several institutions, including for example UCC, have made the expansion of work placement in their undergraduate programmes a priority in their current strategic plans.

Figure 1: Number of Undergraduate Courses with Placement Programmes per HEI (excluding clinical placements)



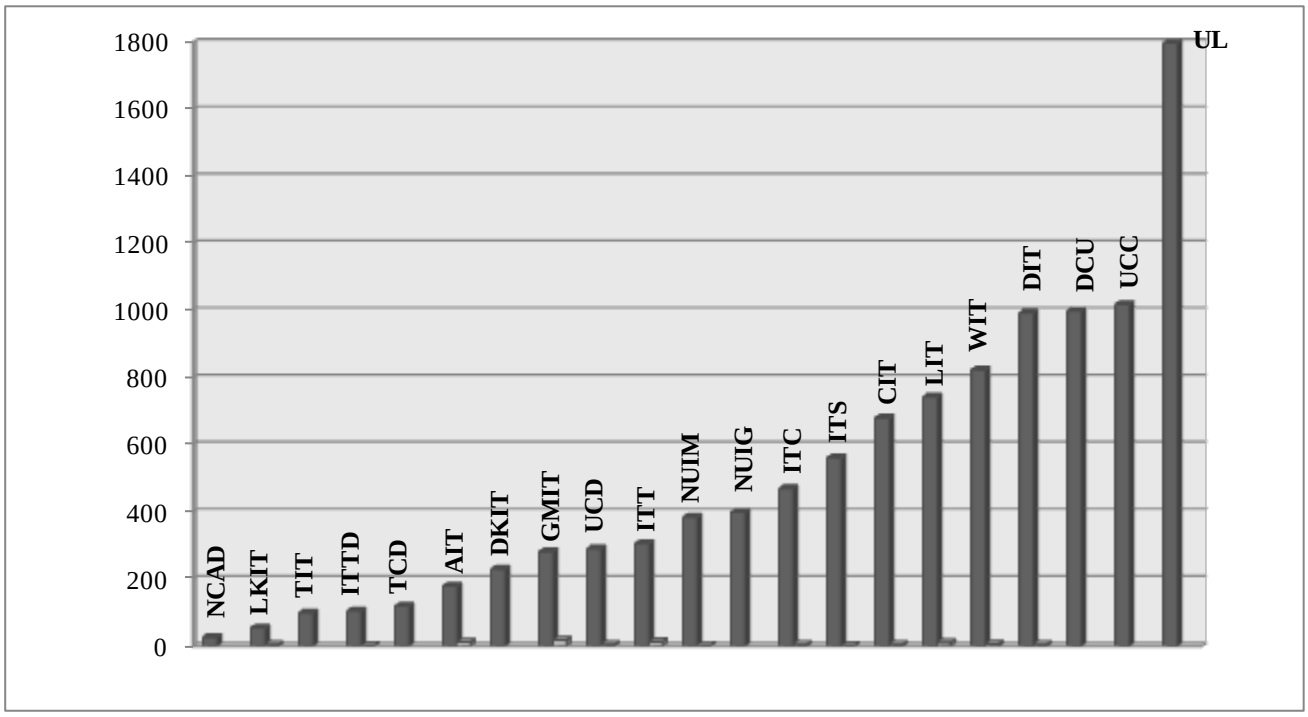
When the courses in the previous graph are broken down further by course type, of the 411 courses identified 68 per cent are Level 8 Honours Degrees, 25 per cent are Level 7 Ordinary Degrees, and just 7 per cent involve Higher Certificate courses. In terms of academic disciplines, figure 2 below depicts the spread of these 411 courses per discipline. As this graph shows, placement appears to be most common in Science and Computing programmes with almost 37 per cent of the courses identified falling within this discipline. Placement is also popular in Business related courses, as almost a quarter of the courses identified are related to this field. Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences make up approximately 18 per cent of the courses in this study, followed by Construction and Engineering courses which account for roughly 15 per cent. Medicine and Health courses make up only 5 per cent of the courses in this study, but again that is due to the exclusion of courses with clinical placements. If such courses were included, the number of placement programmes in this discipline would be significantly increased. Finally, Law courses only make up 1 per cent of the courses in this research.

Figure 2: Placement Programmes per Discipline



The remainder of the results presented here are based on the survey responses received by the research team which amounted to 319 responses from 21 HEIs, equating to a 78 per cent survey response rate overall. According to these responses, 10,577 undergraduate students from Irish HEIs go on placement on an annual basis. This number represents close to 10 per cent of the overall undergraduate student body enrolled in Irish HEIs which the HEA calculated as being 124,990 for the 2008/2009 academic year. However, it is important to acknowledge that as this figure is missing statistics from over ninety courses from which a response to the placement survey was not received, as well as courses which include clinical placements which were not incorporated here, it somewhat under-reports the true extent of work placement in Irish HEIs. Thus, with such a large number of students seeking placement on an annual basis, it is not surprising that the placement field has become a lot more competitive, especially in the current economic climate where companies who may previously have taken students on placement may just not be in a position to do so now. In terms of the number of undergraduate students per HEI who take part in work placement programmes, figure 3 below presents the current picture according to the survey responses received, so it is reasonable to expect the shape of this graph to change somewhat if all 411 of the courses identified in this research provided survey responses.

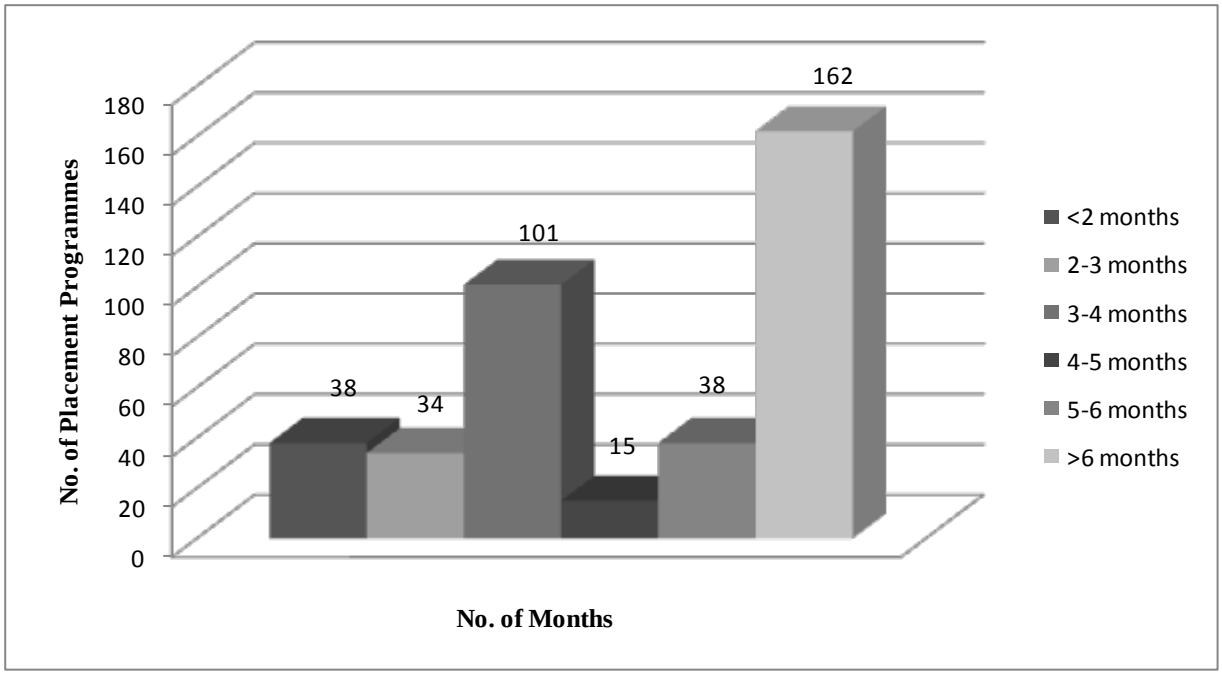
Figure 3: Number of Undergraduate Students on Placement Programmes per HEI



It is again important to remember that students on clinical placements are not included in these figures, so that would also change this graph if they were included. For example, UCC's number of students on placement would raise dramatically from just over 1,000 students to almost 3,000 students. As the graph stands however, there is once again great variance here between the HEIs with more than half of the institutions on the left hand side of the graph having less than 400 students involved in placement, while on the right hand side, there are several institutions who come close to having 1,000 students or more on placement programmes. When the number of students who partake in placement programmes is broken down by course type, the prominence of placement programmes in Level 8 degrees is once again demonstrated with 79 per cent of students on placement registered at this level. 17 per cent of students on placement are registered on Level 7 programmes, with just 4 per cent registered on Higher Certificate courses. In terms of academic discipline, 28 per cent of the students on placement in these courses are enrolled in the disciplines of Science and Computing; 27 per cent are on Business courses; 24 per cent in Humanities, Arts and Social Studies; 15 per cent in Construction and Engineering; 5 per cent in Medicine and Health (excluding clinical placements); and just 1 per cent in Law.

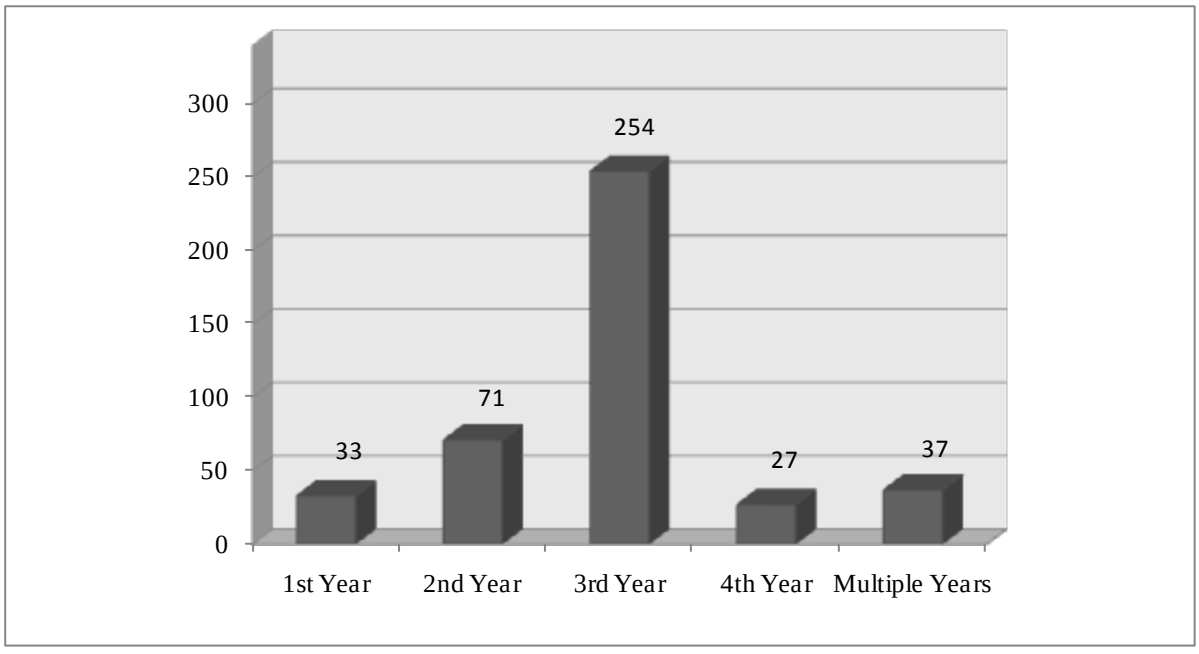
In terms of the design of placement programmes, it was discovered from the surveys that almost all placement programmes are compulsory for students on the courses identified in this research. Indeed, only 10 per cent of the courses examined give students the option of undertaking a work placement as part of their undergraduate studies. The courses that made placement optional were Level 7 and 8 degree courses and were spread across the disciplines, so there were no discernable trends. With regard to the length of placement programmes, figure 4 overleaf demonstrates that 81 per cent of placements of placements falling within the 3-4 month band and 6 month or longer band. Based on the figures provided here, the average length of work placement for an undergraduate student is 21.5 weeks.

Figure 4: Length of Placement Programmes



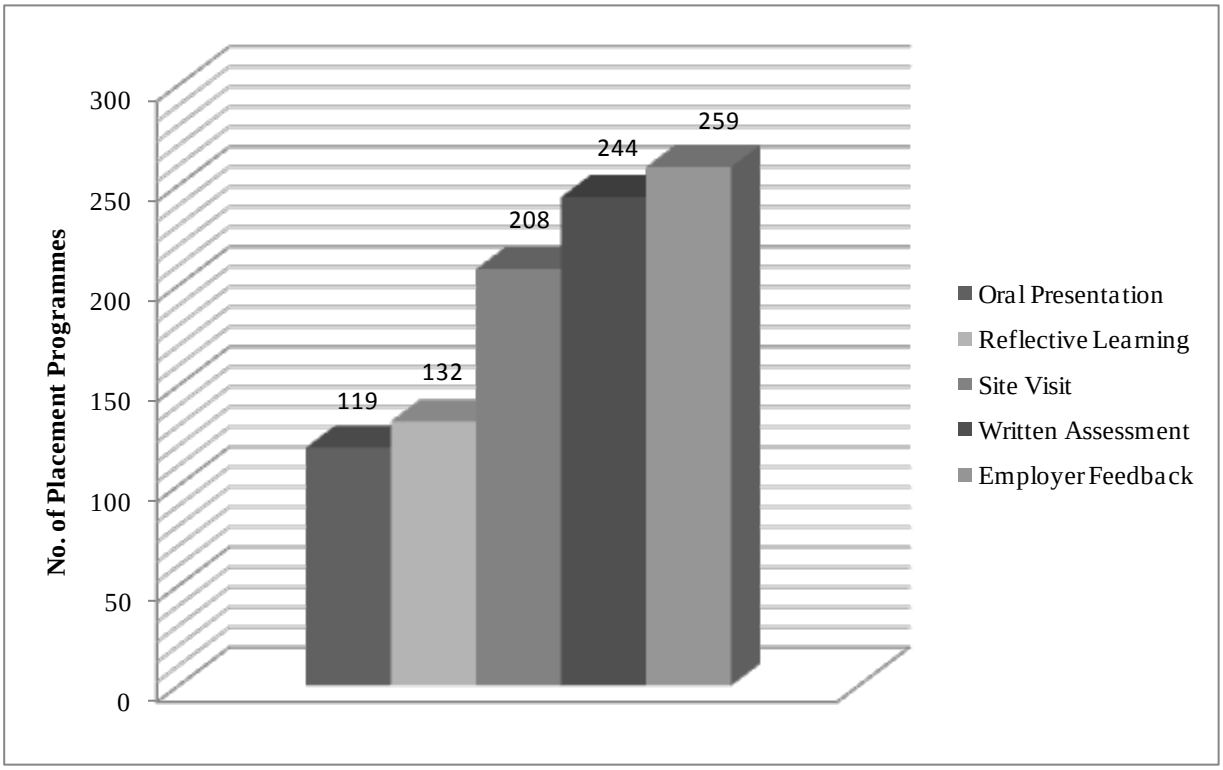
In identifying the stage of a course placement takes place in, as can be seen in figure 5 below, 11 per cent of courses had multiple placements; 10 per cent had placement programmes in first year; 21 per cent had placement programmes in second year; 75 per cent had placement programmes in third year; and 8 per cent had placement programmes in fourth year.

Figure 5: Number of Placement Programmes per Stage of Course



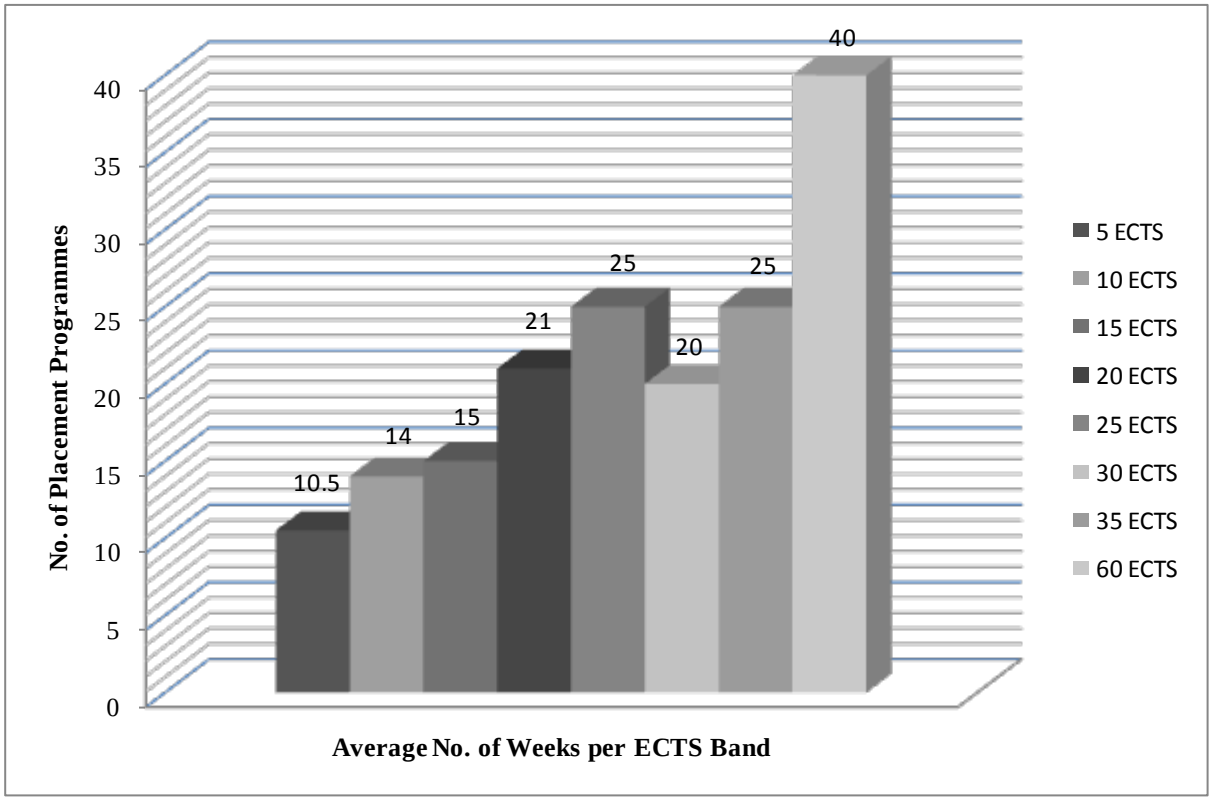
In terms of assessment, a wide array of methods is used to assess placement programmes. According to the survey responses received for this research, it is common for a combination of assessment methods to be used, with the most frequently used being site visits, written assessment and employer feedback as can be seen in figure 6 below.

Figure 6: Methods of Assessment of Placement Programmes per Course



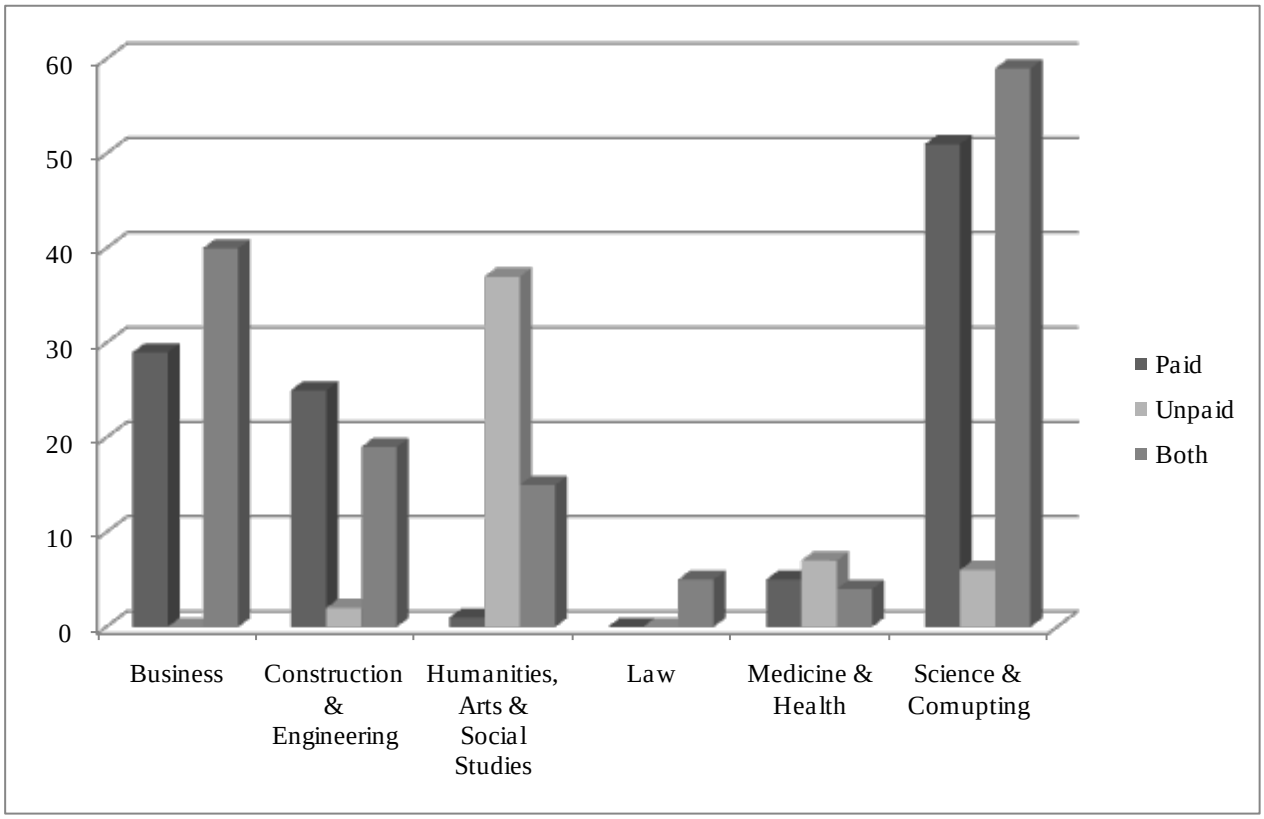
With regard to accreditation, the majority of placement programmes examined in this research are awarded 30 or more ECTS with the average number of ECTS awarded per placement being 20. When the number of credits awarded is examined in terms of the duration of the placement, there is generally a correlation with longer placements earning more credits. However, as can be seen in figure 7 overleaf, this is not always the case.

Figure 7: Number of ECTS per Placement Duration



Finally, as regards the issue of pay, the majority of courses responded that their placements were a mixture of both paid and unpaid. Indeed, only 36 per cent of respondents could say that all their placements were paid. Many respondents also noted that while students on their placement programmes were generally paid in previous years, it had proven a lot more difficult to secure paid placements in the current year, and in some cases, employers would only take students if they did not have to pay them. In looking at the pay issue in terms of course disciplines as is demonstrated in figure 8 overleaf, it appears that students in Science and Computing courses are the most likely to be paid on placement, while students in the Humanities, Arts and Social Studies, as well as Medicine and Health, are more likely to be unpaid.

Figure 8: Paid Versus Unpaid Placements per Discipline



This section of the paper presented quantitative data on the scale and nature of undergraduate work placement in Ireland, which sets the context for the next section of the paper which presents the key challenges facing the management and further development of work placement programmes in Ireland, and some suggested solutions and areas for further research.

Key Challenges for Work Placement in Irish HEIs

Work placement has become a significant part of many undergraduate programmes in Irish HEIs, as demonstrated by the data above. However, the development and management of placement has not been without issue, especially in the economic climate of the last two years or so. This section of the paper presents the results of two large-scale consultations with academics and administrative staff[7] engaged in student placement across the HEI sector in

[7] It should be noted that administrative and staffing arrangements for placement programmes vary across the Irish HEI sector with a mix of models including full-time placement professionals with academic advisory boards, to academic staff taking full responsibility for administration of placement as part of their normal workload.

Ireland (conducted as part of the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) project *Roadmap for Employment Academic Partnerships* (REAP)). The purpose of these sessions was to consult with practitioners in student placement and consider the issues currently facing placement coordinators in Ireland. These consultations consisted of initial plenary sessions to set context and then small group consultation and discussion on a variety of issues. The issues discussed by the small groups were identified through prior consultation with all participants which allowed participants to identify and prioritise their perceptions of the key issues relating to student placement. These sessions were recorded and the content analysed by the authors. This material forms the basis of this section of the paper. The issues seen to be of most significance included:

- The rise of unpaid placements;
- Difficulties in placing international students;
- Challenges in securing and managing international placements;
- Competition from non-HEI placement schemes; and
- Developing alternatives to placement programmes.

These issues are each discussed below along with potential solutions as suggested by the practitioners in the consultative sessions.

Payment and placement

As was discussed earlier, the current economic downturn has led to an increasing number of employers offering students unpaid placements only. Many employers are either not financially stable enough to be able to pay students on placement, or have hiring embargoes in place which forbids them from taking on and paying placement students. The rise in the number of unpaid placements being offered to students over the last two years has led to some significant concerns among HEI staff working in this area. Issues identified were:

- ethical concerns with regard to the potential exploitation of students;
- the grey areas in students' employment rights when in unpaid work;
- possible lack of student motivation to complete unpaid placements;
- issue of fairness when some students will be paid on placement while others are not;
- the financial burden unpaid placements can place on students, and potential related equity issues.

However, placement professionals were not completely disheartened with the increase in unpaid placements as some of them reported positive experiences. In some cases, because the employers could not pay the students, they invested more time, mentoring, training, etc. in providing the student with a better overall experience. This leads us to the fundamental question of what do we actually want from the placement process? The general consensus from placement professionals was that the key focus should be the quality of the placement experience and not the issue of pay – pay should only be seen as a bonus. The development of employability skills, and experience of the real world working environment should be seen as much more important concerns than that of pay. However, it was agreed that from the student's perspective, the issue was perhaps not so straightforward.

A number of suggestions were made as to how these concerns might be addressed. HEIs need to be more flexible in their approach to placement. In the current economic environment, there is perhaps a need for placements to only be offered during the academic year (when the majority of students do not typically engage in employment) in order to allow students the opportunity to take up paid employment for the summer months. For placements that occur out of term time, there is perhaps a need for policy and procedures to be reviewed – for instance, students in unpaid placements could work shorter days or the overall duration of unpaid placements could be reduced, thereby easing financial pressure on students. In terms of the employer, it may be useful for HEI staff to encourage employers to provide some reward for students, maybe in the form of a stipend or travel subsidies, as it must be acknowledged that the students' contribution to the host organisation is worth something. Finally, more attention needs to be paid to managing student expectations. The message must be clearly delivered that on placement, learning is more important than earning!

Issues in placing international students

In 2004 the Irish Department of Education and Science (2004:33) recommended that an aim of 'approximately 12-15% of international students on campus [would be] an appropriate medium-term target for (higher education) institutions.' However, it is important to note that within this category of international students, fee-paying students from outside the European Union are the most lucrative for Irish HEIs. In line with these targets set by the Department of Education and Science, HEIs in Ireland have increased their efforts to recruit non-EU students over the last number of years, and these attempts appear to be working as the number of non-EU students in Ireland has doubled over the past number of years. For the

2001/2002 academic year, the Department of Education (2004: 14) estimated that approximately 5,500 non-EU students were attending higher education courses in Ireland, whereas by late 2009, this figure had grown to 11,344 (Ahern 2010). With such a large number of non-EU students attending higher education in Ireland, it is to be expected that some of these students will be registered on courses with a compulsory work placement element which has proven quite challenging for work placement coordinators for a number of reasons.

There are a number of legal issues surrounding the employment of non-EU students on work placement which can cause concern for employers. For instance, in accordance with student visa guidelines, non-EU students may engage in twenty hours per week of casual employment during term-time, but can only work full-time during normal college vacation periods (Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service). Thus, a grey area exists if a student is required to undertake a full-time work placement during the academic year. Staff from one institution overcame this obstacle by submitting details of courses within their institution where work placement is an integral part of the course to the Department of Education and Science on an annual basis. In this case, students were then given permission to partake in full-time placements during term time. However, this still does not fully rectify the problem as there is a refusal on the part of the Department of Education and Science to issue written approval for such cases. Therefore, although HEIs can give employers assurances that the work placement is legal, some employers may still feel that there is a risk involved in employing non-EU students on work placement and are consequently unwilling to do so. Issues also arise regarding the vetting procedures non-EU students have to complete in order to participate in work placements in some disciplines (social care, childcare, etc.). As there are some concerns that it can be more difficult to fully verify police clearance for non-EU students than it is for Irish and EU students, employers may be apprehensive about hiring such students in these highly sensitive fields.

In their search for work placements, non-EU students may also be hindered by cultural and language barriers as employers may feel that such students require a greater amount of ‘hand-holding’ than perhaps native students do, and in the present economic environment, companies may not be in a position to provide these extra resources. If non-EU students do succeed in securing a work placement, issues surrounding their language and cultural adaptation capabilities can also impede their integration into the workplace. Finally, the contradictory nature of Irish government policy on international students can also

encumber non-EU students' ability to acquire work placement. As was mentioned previously, the government wants to greatly improve Ireland's share of the international student market and benefit from the fees that non-EU students will contribute to Irish HEIs. However, their policy for these students upon graduation is rather restrictive: 'under the third level graduate scheme [non-EU graduates] will be granted one non-renewable extension to their current student permission (Stamp 2) for a six-month period starting on the date upon which the person receives their exam results. The purpose of the permission to remain under this Scheme is to seek employment and gain a Green Card or Work Permit' (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Innovation). Current government policy further dictates that normally work permits will only be issued for those with occupations attracting a salary of €30,000 or more. At first glance, these policies may appear to be entirely unrelated to work placement programmes. However, when one considers that a substantial number of employers who engage in work placement partnerships with HEIs do so as a means of an informal recruitment process whereby the students they take on work placement may potentially be offered full-time employment upon graduation, one can begin to see how such a policy may discriminate against non-EU students. Such discrimination can occur because employers may feel that they are wasting their time investing in a non-EU student on work placement as if they want to continue working with the student after his/her graduation, they will have to pay a salary of €30,000 or more which may be considerably higher than the starting salary they would offer to an Irish graduate. This outlook may then discourage them from even interviewing non-EU students for placement vacancies.

In order to try and alleviate some of these issues, a number of recommendations were suggested by the placement professionals. Firstly, an urgent need was identified for HEIs to come together and form a lobbying group to put pressure on the government to proactively examine this area and create some form of standardised policy which would clearly demarcate legal and illegal practise, and consequently alleviate the risk for employers in taking non-EU students on work placement. It was also suggested that employers' expectations of the placement process could be managed more effectively in order to clearly convey to them that the key aim of placement is for the student to acquire training and experience, and that they would not necessarily have the skills to be a fully independent employee. In this case, it was thought that a brief work placement best practise document which would capture the challenges and benefits of work placement (including work placement for non-EU students) could be distributed among the HEIs, employer

organisations, government departments and employers in order to clearly explain the concept of work placement to key stakeholders and policymakers.

International placements

In the current economic environment, it has proven more difficult than in previous years for placement coordinators to find enough placements for all students. Some companies who may have been HEI partners for years are not in a position to take students now. One way of addressing this declining number of placements within Ireland is to increase the number of international placements available to students in Irish HEIs. While this does seem like a possible answer to the lesser amount of Irish placements, trying to secure quality overseas placements and then manage them can be quite a daunting process for placement coordinators. Issues that arose in discussion with HEI staff engaged in placement were:

- Sourcing quality overseas placements for students;
- Capacity to adequately vet them in order to ensure that students will be safe and well treated;
- Motivating students to take up international placements as students can be put off because of language barriers, anxiety about leaving home, the financial costs, etc;
- Supervision and support of students overseas can be complicated as HEIs have to deal with funding constraints which may not allow for international site visits;
- Problem of potential student loneliness and isolation.

The combination of these concerns may be quite off-putting for placement coordinators, but it is important to emphasise that staff involved in placement believed that international placements could add a significant amount of value to students and should therefore be encouraged as much as possible. A number of suggestions were put forward in order to overcome the obstacles to international placements.

In order to try and source safe and quality international placements, it is vital for all existing networks to be exploited. Overseas partner colleges, alumni and the contacts of lecturers and researchers in Irish HEIs can all prove to be valuable points of contact in both the search for placements and as a means of providing support structures for students abroad. Public agencies such as Enterprise Ireland (which has thirty-one international offices) and Irish consulates could also be utilised. In order to have students willing to take up such placements, it is important that overseas placements are effectively marketed to students as a

means of investing in their future. In addition, students should be encouraged to undertake language training from as early as possible in their undergraduate careers. It is also important to ensure that overseas placements have senior management buy-in at the HEI level and that both the HEI and the host employer are firmly committed to the scheme. In the absence of adequate funding for the sourcing of such placements, there is a need for placement coordinators to become more aware about the funding schemes in operation. For instance, the EU's Erasmus Preparatory Visits scheme offers grants for visits by HEI personnel to enterprises or organisations in other EU states in order to establish Erasmus student placements. It was also suggested that a contingency plan be put in place for students who fail international placements before the situation arises. There should be a clearly defined process which the student should be made aware of before leaving Ireland on placement. Finally, it was recommended that HEIs around Ireland should collaborate more in the provision of international placements. For example, students from HEIs all around Ireland who are taking up placements in the same geographical location overseas could be put in contact with each other.

Competition from non-HEI placement schemes

A further and more recent challenge for placement coordinators is the establishment of placement schemes outside of Ireland's HEIs. The two main schemes that HEIs are challenged with are programmes aimed at getting unemployed graduates back to work. One is run by the Irish Business Employers Confederation (IBEC) and the other by the State training agency FÁS. The IBEC programme offers up to nine month placements (both paid and unpaid) for all graduates giving them 'an important opportunity to kick-start your career by giving you real life work experience and improve your employment potential while trying to build your CV (IBEC).' The FÁS programme offers two schemes for both unemployed graduates and the general unemployed as a means of gaining practical experience in the workplace, as well as learning how to use new and existing skills. In the case of both the IBEC and FÁS schemes, where an applicant has been in receipt of social welfare payments for three months, they can retain these payments for the duration of the placement. The challenge this poses for HEI placement programmes is that undergraduates now appear to be somewhat in competition with more qualified and experienced graduates. From the point of view of an employer, it may be more valuable to engage in the IBEC and FÁS schemes and hire a fully qualified graduate, in comparison to taking on a relatively inexperienced third

year undergraduate from a HEI. Although these schemes are relatively new to the market, placement coordinators have reported that there is already evidence emerging of these schemes acting as competition for undergraduate programmes.

There is therefore an urgent need for Irish HEIs to provide some form of a coordinated response to these schemes. A key difficulty in formulating a response is the fact that it is HEI graduates who are benefitting from them and HEIs must support their graduates, as well as their undergraduates. Instead of viewing these schemes in a competitive light, it may perhaps be more useful to view them as an opportunity for collaboration. Indeed, during the consultative process it was suggested that a partnering deal could be agreed whereby undergraduate students could shadow graduates on these placement schemes in a coat-tail arrangement which could benefit all key stakeholders. The students and graduates benefit from obtaining practical experience; the HEI benefits from placing its undergraduate students while also supporting its graduates; and the employer benefits from having two relatively well-educated interns in its organisation.

Alternatives to placement

Finally, placement coordinators are also challenged by the need to provide alternatives to placement in cases where a placement cannot be found for a student or where a placement is just not suitable for a particular student for health or personal reasons. The types of alternatives that have been used by Irish HEIs in the past include:

- Research projects;
- Alternative modules;
- Community work; and
- Business simulation exercises.

However, with all of these alternatives, while they do contribute to students' personal development, it is almost impossible to fully replicate a real-world work placement experience. Among the placement coordinators, there was a general consensus that these alternatives will not be as beneficial to students in the long-term as work placement will always be a unique selling point of a student's CV. There was therefore a feeling that non-placement students do miss out on valuable experience. As regards these alternatives, there is also the complex issue of matching learning outcomes for placement and non-placement students on the same course as the experiences they encounter will be very different. In such

cases, the HEI can only do so much in trying to replicate the placement experience and even the best efforts are likely to fall short. It is therefore essential for placement staff to endeavour to give every student some form of practical experience – even if this means having to be more flexible in the design of placement programmes (shorter placements, part-time placements, etc.). A greater emphasis on community/voluntary sector-based placements may supply some of the solution here (Subotzky 1999). It is also important for HEIs to recognise the need to prepare contingency plans for unplaced students, but to not necessarily advertise these alternatives to students as unfortunately, some students may perceive them as the easy option.

Conclusion

Despite the significant evidence of the benefits of placement from the literature, and from consultation with practitioners, there are areas which require practical and conceptual attention in Irish HEIs. Firstly, there is an absence of commonly accepted understandings as to the nature and extent of placement. There appears to be a lack of agreement on the purpose of placement, whether that is to obtain industry experience, to experience workplace socialisation, to practice specific skills, to learn new skills, etc. This tension must be resolved so that the student's learning is always the key focus of placement. The type of learning required for the student should then help dictate the details as regards the extent of placement – duration, types of duties, etc. There is also a need for some form of standardisation of norms as regards placement: for instance, there could be a commonly agreed practice in Irish HEIs for identifying the number of credits awarded per placement duration; a common set of guidelines could be produced for employers engaged in the placement process, etc. These issues and the variety in expectations among HEIs as regards placement can be partly explained by the absence of a national placement organisation which is quite striking in comparison to other countries. This absence of coherence is quite problematic since many of the recommendations suggested by those engaged in placement would require common acceptance to be effective. However, it is clear that the difficult economic environment that pertains at present colours the views and there is perforce increased competition for placements in general, and among HEIs, and now between HEIs and non HEI organisations seeking placements, thereby creating an environment where competition and not collaboration may remain the stance of many. Nonetheless, given the general acceptance of

placements and the increasing emphasis on placement by policy makers, it would seem sensible that those engaged in placement seek to determine a common position on various matters and through this coming together facilitate the addressing of pragmatic issues such as norms and standards, but also critical problems such as student support and the avoidance of student isolation on international placement.

This paper therefore recommends that:

- Placement professionals should engage in increased collaboration on a national basis in order to improve policy development and coordination in this field;
- Irish HEIs should maintain their focus on student employability and where possible, try to provide students with substantive real-world work experience – Irish HEIs may have to become more flexible in their approach in order to achieve this goal;
- Industry in Ireland should be encouraged to increase the number of placements and the quality of those placements provided to students through further extending schemes such as IBEC Gradlink and FÁS Work Placement Programme to undergraduates;
- Further research should be conducted in this field in order to capture the experiences of students and employers engaged in this process. With regard to students, possible future research could focus on a time-series analysis of placement students as they progress beyond graduation into the early stages of their careers in order to assess the impact, if any, their placement experience had on their employability. In relation to employers, a national survey of their experiences may provide HEIs with industry focused guidance on the future direction of placement programmes. A crucial area for further research in HEIs is the nature and pedagogical implications of alternatives to work placement.

In line with international practice, work placement programmes have experienced a period of growth in Irish HEIs as third level institutions attempt to make their graduates as employable as possible. While the expansion of these schemes can create many benefits for all key stakeholders, the development and management of them is not without difficulty. Indeed, the current economic climate appears to be only adding obstacles to these programmes. This is of concern since history shows that investment during a downturn leads to success when pressures ease, and investment in employability is an investment in the future (CBI 2009:6). As Richard Lambert, Director General of the Confederation of British Industry, argued, ‘investing in ensuring our graduates are fit to take on the challenges they

will face and make the most of the opportunities open to them will contribute towards enabling the UK to be well-placed in the future' (CBI 2009:2). The Irish case is not at all dissimilar. Irish students, employers and HEIs have a lot to benefit from placement experiences, benefits that can only enrich the Irish economy.

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