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The Tri-Party Partnership: An Investigation into the Existing Support Structures Within a DIT Work Placement

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Abstract

The readiness of students entering the workforce upon graduating has been widely researched in Ireland, and a student work placement that is embedded in the curriculum is commonly recognised as a crucial mechanism that is key to preparing graduates for the 'real world'. In this particular study, the voice of many key parties are captured, including the students themselves, members of the academic department who coordinate the programme, and the industry partners. Recommendations are made based on the findings that highlighted gaps or weaknesses in the existing student support structures, along with the addition of an updated academic institution-industry partnership structure that will facilitate the requirements of all three parties involved – student, institution and employer. The new structure will be piloted in early 2015.

Keywords: work-based learning, work-integrated learning, work placement, higher education, academic industry partnerships.

Introduction

This research paper investigates the work placement support structures for a level seven-degree programme in an Institute of Technology in Dublin. Students of the BA in Visual Merchandising and Display are placed in industry twice over the three years of their academic study. The first phase consists of a two-week placement in the first semester of second year; the last week of October and the first week of November. The second phase of the work placement plays a more dominant role, with students on placement for two days a week, for the entire academic year. A previous article documents prior research undertaken by one of the authors that attempts to ascertain the benefits for the student cohorts. The previous article assessed the learning theories behind work based learning, and researches relevant literature.³⁸ Building on this, this paper now questions both student cohorts on their perception of the support structures in place for them, both before and during their placement, by collecting and analysing data. This is to aid an analysis of the effectiveness of the current methods of support, and whether or not improvements need to be made to this aspect of the programme. The data collection took place at the end of semester one in 2014. A mixed methods approach was deemed to be suitable, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. From the data the following issues need to be addressed: Are the support structures working? Have the tutors the correct amount of time allowance to cater for the needs of the students whilst on placement? What are the issues that arise on placement?

Rationale

Within the three dimensions of learning, the emotional, social and the cognitive must be taken into account, where *'all learning is situated'*.³⁹

³⁸ Meakin, 2010

³⁹ Illeris, 2004, p. 434

Engeström (2001) believed learning in the workplace was a mechanism for creating shared meanings, while school education is essentially about the reproduction of culture, vocational education — whether located in third level institutions or in the work place — and has the potential to foster creativity and competency in workplaces and other settings⁴⁰. There is considerable evidence in literature supporting the general value of '*work integrated learning*' in a co-operative '*interdependent*' process involving academia and industry⁴¹. Indeed, many businesses attach some strategic importance to this by offering direct work experience to those who may be their future employees. Essentially, employers seek people who are '*work ready*'.⁴²

Workplace learning is a paradigm case of informal education which is undervalued by all levels in the formal education system, with training historically being viewed as the antithesis of education. However, work experience is inherent in many training practices, such as apprenticeship schemes for trade's people, and internships for medicine and law. The physician's art of diagnosis and the lawyer's skill of advocacy are learned on the job at least partly by imitation.⁴³ The supervision of a student has the potential to improve the knowledge, skills and values in relation to the member of staff supervising the placement, and it also becomes an addition to their résumé or CV.⁴⁴ Students engaging in meaningful work placements experience the best of deep learning, and transform their information and ideas into knowledge and understanding.⁴⁵

The Higher Education Authority views work placements as one of the mechanisms for initiating quality partnerships between higher education and industry. Since the initial research in 2010⁴⁶ on work placement benefits for the students on the BA Visual Merchandising & Display, a consortium of Higher Education Institutes in Ireland have published a document on Work Placement in Third-Level Programmes. This comprehensive report by the Roadmap for Employment–Academic Partnerships (REAP) draws together perspectives on work placement from the Higher Education Institutes, Employers and Students. The agreed benefits of placement in the report included:

- Enhancing networking and mutual understanding between Higher Education Institutes and workplaces
- Maintaining curriculum relevance along with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge
- Integrating employability skills into curriculum

Concerns raised regarding work placements included:

⁴⁰ Engeström, 2001

⁴¹ Herbert and Rothwell, 2005, p. 16

⁴² Herbert and Rothwell, 2005, p. 6; Fanthorne, 2004

⁴³ Moodie, 2008

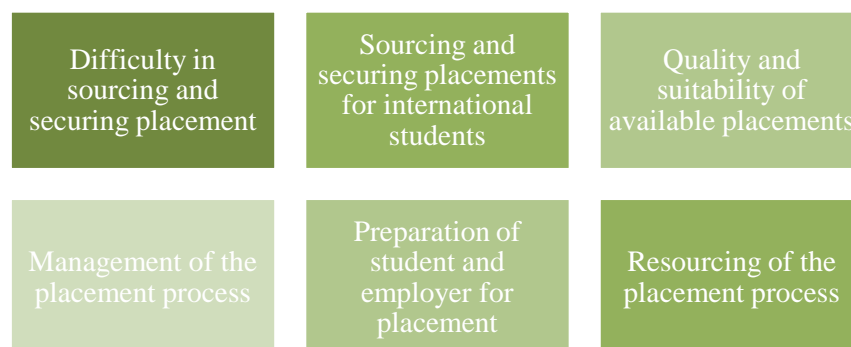
⁴⁴ Anderson et al, 1996

⁴⁵ Entwistle, 2000

⁴⁶ Meakin, 2010

- Need for allocated resources to organise and monitor placement learning
- No consistent framework for alternatives to placements within programmes
- Difficulty in sourcing placements for a growing number of students (particularly sourcing and managing international placements)

The difficulties discussed here in regards to support structures in place for managing student work placements is nothing new. Sheridan & Lenihan (2013, p.8) also highlight similar obstacles⁴⁷:



These findings, in particular those of the REAP study, flag particular concerns that are of significant importance to this research paper, and required further research for this specific degree's work placement component. Thus, both the second year and third year cohorts were surveyed on their perceptions of the support structures currently in place for them while on placement, to identify the gaps and weaknesses in the structures and explore their possible resolutions.

The Second Year Experience

Students in second year of the BA Visual Merchandising & Display are on placement at the busiest time of the retail year, so an analysis of their perceptions of the support structures in place for them was required. The students are involved in the realisation of visual merchandising Christmas windows and in-store installation projects throughout Dublin city with a range of retail creative departments, and this takes place during weeks six and seven in the first semester of the academic calendar. Strong links are maintained with the industry annually through this placement, which also gives the students a 'taster' of the route they may wish to pursue further while on the more 'in-depth' placement in third year. The second year tutor sources the two-week placement; the placement sourcing begins before the commencement of the academic year. Due to the reactive nature of retail and the turnover of staff in industry, the timing of the placements may not suit all employers, and industry contacts may have changed from one year to the next. The first issue is the contacting of all previous and potential new employers to align the needs and timing of the employer placement with the needs of the students. 2014 was a particularly hard year to source placement

⁴⁷ Sheridan & Linehan, 2013, p.8

due to the larger number of 29 second year students. The sourcing of placements is completed during the tutor's administration time; there is no time allocation of teaching hours. The tutor also has no allocation of time during the placements to pay on-site visits, due to this; the tutor's perception is that improved structures need to be in place for the students, the employer and the programme.

The students in this study were surveyed regarding their thoughts on their work placement in December 2014 and the following is an account of the participants' views of the structures in place for them while on placement.

Methodology

The same survey was issued to both second and third year cohorts with a small amendment to cover preparation for work placement in the second year survey. The methodology used to gather the data was a mixed methods approach. Quantitative data was gathered by asking participants to answer 14 questions on the second year questionnaire and 15 on the third year questionnaire; five of these elicited a Strongly Agree, Agree, Don't Know, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. Statistics, such as the number of pupils emitting either a positive or negative response were gathered. Qualitative, anecdotal data was gathered by asking for the participants' comments; therefore giving information on relevant contextual issues, possible biases, and values. They were informed that the data would be compiled and the information would be used in the writing of this paper, and anonymity was granted.

Findings

Findings 1 – Second Year.

The second year students were asked to voluntarily complete an anonymous survey on the conclusion of their work placements, seventeen participants completed the survey. Emerging themes regarding placement were:

- 66% agreeing that the work placement was beneficial in aiding them to understand how the VM industry works
- 75% of the students were very satisfied with their work placement
- 60% agreeing the work placement would prepare them for industry when they graduate
- 82% believed the placement has increased their confidence when looking for a job on graduating

Negative work experiences included:

- A lack of confidence from the VM team in the students skills and abilities
- Repetitive jobs
- Being left idle as staff were unsure what to do with them

Second year students are prepared for placement by tutors by the revision of practical skills taught in year one with further skills relevant to the work placements introduced before going on placement. Alongside the work placement preparation, second year students' work on a design brief, which is

researched, designed, realised and installed the week before the placement starts, which incorporates the skills they learnt in work placement preparation. The time spent on preparation served the students well, with 81% stating they received support in preparing for placement. Comments included;

- *'I felt well prepared for the placement.'*
- *'We had practical classes before placement in order to prepare us.'*
- *'The tutors are always supportive and want nothing but the best for everyone. They put their heart in to everyone and I am highly grateful.'*
- *'Lots of practical classes helped.'*
- *'Practical prep was given and a refresher in everything learned in 1st year'*

When asked to rate their overall experience of their work placement on the attributes such as their professional practical work place skills, 78% of the participants of the survey were satisfied, however 43% were dissatisfied with their learning of new skills such as software or teamwork.

- *'We went into the placement with the skill we were taught by our tutors and at the end I felt I didn't improve on them. I felt I didn't gain any new skills.'*
- *'Did not learn any new practical skills, was unchallenged and uninspired in work placement.'*
- *'I didn't learn more than I knew already but it helped me to become more confident in the skills I already have.'*

On being asked about how much support was given to them during the placement by their work placement supervisor/team, very positive comments abounded, including:

- *'A lot of support as I was teamed with someone new every day.'*
- *'A lot. They taught us how to do things and were really good at running through things with us. Before placement I had no idea how to sew and after them teaching me I am confident in my sewing skills.'*
- *'A lot and very good support.'*
- *'The team we worked with were fantastic. Highly motivated, very positive and demanding (in a good way).'*

Non positive comments included:

- *'Not much support was given. We were left in the fire exit for hours on end without anyone coming down to us.'*
- *'Not a lot, we were left alone most of the time.'*
- *'Prep before placement was essential. Training and manual handling was given, but an introduction to the team would have been appreciated.'*

Positive experiences were working with the team; this was mentioned in comments by a 33% of the survey participants:

- *'Sometimes I felt the jobs you felt you were capable of they wouldn't let you do.'*
- *'We were not allowed to do somewhat difficult jobs; I felt the team had no confidence in us.'*

- *'There weren't any negative experiences during my work placement; sometimes I felt communication between the teams could have been better.'*
- *'I was unable to know if I could actually use any of the practical or creative skills that I had learned on the course, due to the fact that the tasks I was given were very basic and unchallenging.'*

Comments from the 82% of the participants surveyed who believed the placement had increased their confidence for looking for a job on graduating included:

- *'I enjoyed it thoroughly and it has built my confidence and my ability.'*
- *'Before the placement I wasn't as confident in my abilities to work with others and if my contributions would be on a level with others, but after working with others I am more confident in myself.'*

When asked what they disliked most about their placement, participants responded:

- *'Early mornings and travelling to lots of different places, apart from that I really enjoyed it.'*
- *'I found it overall rather boring'*
- *'I disliked the lack of responsibility in the work.'*
- *'For the entire duration of my work placement I was stringing up decorations with nylon thread in a fire exit. Anyone could have done that job. I would have liked to work in windows and style mannequins.'*
- *'Nightshifts were an experience in itself, as previously stated, long shifts and lack of sleep. But this was a real thing so it can be gotten used to.'*
- *'I was idle for a lot of the time and staff were unsure what to do with me. Very little structure in the day, the department was disorganised.'*

The question 'what did you like most about your placement?' elicited the following responses which fell into two themes, team work and responsibility:

Team work:

- *'The great atmosphere in team. Manager was amazing and very supportive.'*
- *'The team were lovely people to work with.'*
- *'Working with the team, they were very motivating and friendly. The work we were doing was highly motivating and interesting.'*
- *'I never felt like I was on work experience I had a really good sense of team work.'*

Responsibility:

- *'Decorating the windows, they let me have an opinion and input.'*
- *'That I was able to work by myself and did not need someone watching over me all the time.'*
- *'I liked that on my second week I was given a lot more responsibility'*
- *'I liked that I was trusted with doing tasks and displays by myself.'*

When questioned on suggestions for improving the student work placement?
Replies included:

- *'More communication with the job about our capabilities.'*
- *'That the tutor pays a visit, just to make sure all goes well.'*
- *'Ensuring that there is a specific timetable and enough work for everyone to do. . .'*
- *'More practical/creative jobs.'*
- *'Have one to one with a student and a VM, because this is what I had and I found it very valuable.'*
- *'Maybe only have one student for each company.'*

Suggestions included for improving the workplace experience for future students were:

- *'More students going to stores that give a more hands on professional realistic experience.'*
- *'More hands on approach.'*
- *'– Specific timetable'*
- *'– Enough work to do for all students'*
- *'– Get shown basics.'*
- *'Don't be shy to ask questions – if you don't ask you will never know. The only way we learnt about the VM team was when we asked them questions about what they do.'*
- *'If the work experience took on a more structured approach during the two weeks. i.e.: students have to complete a number of table displays, wall displays, window changes or complete certain tasks.'*

Findings 2 - Third Year.

Responses in regards to the support the students received both before and during placement were extremely positive, in contrast to the second year cohort's. Interestingly, when asked to choose the most important support structure in place for them during their placement, a majority 67% of students cited the tutor visits, with 56% citing their supervisor or team. The following points summarise student appreciation for both the supervisor and tutor supports that are in place for this cohort of the programme:

- *'The team and supervisor are great and always around to teach.'*
- *'The supervisor is very helpful when I am struggling.'*
- *'I liked our tutor was on site for discussion.'*
- *'The tutor visit helped progress my final design project.'*
- *'Our tutors without a doubt, just being able to discuss any problems or fears with them. Knowing we had them there if anything went wrong was a great security blanket.'*
- *'We had regular tutorials to see how we were getting on. Tutors always answered emails and were always available to meet for extra help when required.'*

33% cited support from peers and sharing of blogs as a strong support structure:

- *‘Support from peers because it was interesting to hear other students’ experiences and stories about their work placements. This was useful because it allowed me to gain info on VM in other stores.’*

Findings 3 – Employer Feedback.

To ascertain any weaknesses in the partnership, the employers of the third year cohort were also surveyed in December 2014, half way through the student’s placement. A short set of questions explored their views on the benefit of the placement to their organisations, and the benefits to the students, investigating methods through which the partnership could be strengthened.

Surprisingly, employer feedback stipulated little need for a more structured direction in terms of what is required in training a student who is on placement with them, instead suggestions for improvement revolved around specific gaps in practical training. In addition, many employers stressed their enthusiasm to facilitate and improve the student experience, welcoming feedback on this from the college. Of the fifteen employers surveyed who had a third year VM student on placement, a minute rate of just 21% requested a more structured format to clarify the requirements of all parties. This may be due in part to the fact that this cohort had been on placement in the previous year, and was better prepared for the working environment. Interestingly, 64% of employers cited the work placement as a very useful recruitment tool, with 93% agreeing that the placement was beneficial to their company. Employers also expressed willingness to grow the interaction with the institution beyond the work placement itself and suggesting improvements to course content, thereby further strengthening this support structure for the placements:

- *‘We are a small but rapidly expanding company...I would like to keep in contact for more students.’*
- *‘More education in the area of practical side of prop/display making’.*
- *‘I felt that the 2nd year students that came in for the 2 week placement were a little underprepared for how hectic a Christmas launch would be, maybe some extra work placement through the year might be beneficial? I’m sure our VM regional manager would be quite happy to facilitate expanding upon the work placements if this was a possibility....’*

Recommendations

Support Structure 1 – Enhancing the Industry-Institution Partnership.

It has been the intention of the BA Visual Merchandising & Display program to include the student work placement as an instrument of academic-industry partnership, striving to develop a sustainable relationship that acts as a support structure for students while on placement. Sheridan and Linehan (2013) point out that while the work placement interaction forms an important part of the learning pathway between the student and the employer, the interaction between the employer and the academic institution is often

overlooked, and could be exploited in the context of broader interaction possibilities.

The faculty hope to address new opportunities for enhancing the industry-academic partnership through the integration of the new website that will be dedicated to the work placement aspect of the degree programme, www.visualmerchandising.ie. In union with the information contained online, a hard copy document or pack as was suggested earlier will also be provided to industry. This combination hopes to provide a solid framework to support the institution-industry collaboration in the organization of the work placement. Overall, in addition to the high satisfaction levels surveyed of the industry partners, their enthusiasm to be involved in the development of the curriculum has been seen as a very positive result, which will enable the enhancement of the partnership, which can only stand to benefit the students - who ultimately, are the future of this industry.

By analysing the employer perspective, it is clear that the many benefits of the student work placement in third year are severely lacking in second year. It is hoped that in addition to increased time allocation for faculty and new mechanisms of improved communication, many of the challenges the second year placement currently faces will be resolved.

Support Structure 2 – A Tri-Party Agreement for Before, During & After Placement

The REAP project team developed a set of guidelines to support improved work placement processes, providing a framework for good practice which addresses many of the issues and concerns raised in this research. The framework addresses:

- The roles of the employer,
- the higher education institution and
- the student
- before, during and after the placement process

It also highlighted the need for a three-party agreement to prepare for, support and evaluate the interaction. In this way, all parties to the interaction are supported, and there is an opportunity to evaluate the process to allow it to contribute to the organisational learning and development of practice. An Employer Pack, alongside containing information regarding the practical abilities of the students, will also contain a contract between all three parties on the nature of the placement and outline agreed learning outcomes for the students.

Support Structure 3 – Increased Tutor Site Visits.

Student visits are integral to investigate problematic issues that arise between employers and students, and should be done in second year, as it is clear that third year are not experiencing the same difficulties. It is clear from the findings of the third year study that the tutor visits have not only offered support to the students, but enabled them to develop their individual project

work. It is highly recommended there is a time allocation for a tutor/tutors to visit second year students while on placement. This will present difficulties as they take place over a shorter timeframe than third year placements, however, it is believed the benefits of the visits to the three parties will far out way any logistical problems.

Support Structure 4 – Reflective Blog Learning.

The work placement is documented daily by the student, students are encouraged to use an individual blog, and the student must upload photographs of their daily tasks and write a short description of how the fundamentals of visual merchandising studied in college relate to real life practice. However, some students prefer the method of a written daily diary, which they present in print. Further analysis of the work undertaken, including the role of the student during the placement and the learning outcomes, takes place during a class presentation with the tutor and peers on return to the college. The students individually present either their blog or a PowerPoint on their day-to-day tasks including visuals of the work undertaken. This visual presentation allows the tutor and the peers to gain an in-depth account of the work placement, and encourages the student to self-reflect.

Research has been done on the value of recording events and experiences in written form, particularly through the use of reflective diaries and journals.⁴⁸ The exercise of diary writing promotes the qualities required for reflection, critical analysis and problem solving, synthesis and evaluation.⁴⁹ It is believed by writing both a daily diary and by presenting to the tutor and peers regarding their experience that students are both using reflection two ways; by 'reflecting in action', during the experience and by 'reflecting on action', after the experience.⁵⁰ Involving or actively engaging learners was viewed by Confucius as the most effective method for learners to retain information.⁵¹ The involvement Confucius dictates is the same cry 21st century students are expressing in their desire to be involved and engaged in their learning process, and this is evident from the positive responses from the student surveys of this study that stress their enjoyment of being involved in real projects while on work placement.

Due to the individualistic nature of the work placement, students are unable to learn from their peers since they are under the sole guidance of their employer and supervising tutor. They are not formally supported by their peers, and it can be difficult for them to ascertain how their own experience relates to those of their fellow students. The sharing of these experiences to peers via the blog format provides them with an opportunity to reflect on learning and get constructive feedback from their fellow classmates. McNamara (2009) emphasises that blogs engage students in collaborative learning, encourages deeper analysis and critical thinking.⁵² Likewise, E-

⁴⁸ Zubbrizarreta 1999 and Tryssenaar 1995

⁴⁹ Richardson & Maltby, 1995

⁵⁰ Schon, 1983

⁵¹ Hsu et al, 2011

⁵² McNamara (2009)

portfolios (similar to blogs) are increasingly being utilised in higher education to encourage collaboration, encourage feedback and facilitate reflection, and are of particular benefit to the disciplines within Art and Design.⁵³ Research also shows a very positive response to blogs for learning generally, and particularly for learning through sharing diverse experiences such as those which occur on work placements.⁵⁴

The blogs for both years of the BA Visual Merchandising have proven to be highly informative, with students not only taking ownership and pride in them, but they are eager to share what they have done/learnt each week with both the tutor and the class, and it is proving to be a significant support structure in itself, in this regard. The feedback given by the lecturers focus on improving self-reflection and relating their placement experiences to their studies in college, as opposed to directly commenting on their performances on specific tasks. Indeed, many students cited that the blogs allowed them to feel connected to their class while out on their placement. From this study, it has become evident that the blog has the potential to become a new source of peer support that students can truly identify with.

Conclusion: The Future Importance & Evolution of the Work Placement

It is widely recognised that students will enjoy the many social aspects of fieldwork, the active learning aspect is highly effective.⁵⁵ Practical work placements can help students to consolidate knowledge gained during the year in the classroom. It can be used to feel how it is to work in the real world, and help to develop practical and procedural understanding.⁵⁶ This theory coincides with an interview between the BBC World Service and Hewlett Packard's Managing Director, Nick Wilson.⁵⁷ The interview discussed how worldwide, countries are re-assessing the standards and future options for higher education. Businesses are now getting more involved with HEIs, creating courses tailored to help employers find exactly what they need. Hewlett Packard finds it so difficult to find people with the right skills and necessary training they need coming out of British Universities, that they are now sponsoring their own degrees. Wilson explains that HP is taking this hands on approach by investing in partnerships with universities, incorporating work experience, endorsing degrees, guaranteeing jobs, etc. The upside here is that the businesses are funding higher education's goals, but are they interfering in education purely to shape it for their own purposes?

An integrated, in depth and tailored work placement can be an invaluable learning resource; one that can help teachers keep up with issues relevant to current industry practice, and improve student's employability in an unstable economy. For HP, it creates productive graduates in under six months, versus taking 12-18 months to train a graduate with no experience. Work placements provide many opportunities to foster the development of the

⁵³ Keane, 2014

⁵⁴ Dunne (2011)

⁵⁵ Higgs and McCarthy (2005)

⁵⁶ (Higgs and McCarthy, 2005).

⁵⁷ Global Business with Peter Day: Class Struggle, 20:32, 22/01/12, BBC World Service

agility, adaptability and employability of students, through the support of HEIs and employers working together. By working closely together, the HEI and the employer can enable a student's successful transition into the work place. The two paramount recommendations suggested in this study to improve the existing support structures in place are enhancing the HEI's partnership with industry, and improved communication processes that clarify the expectations of all three parties involved. The programme's new website and Information Pack aims to bridge the communication gap, to produce a viable outcome for the partners, and the best possible experience of the students. The support of peers via blog sharing will be an additional support structure that will serve to facilitate their learning and reflection. The faculty members of the program are continually striving to bring their proficiency in teaching and pedagogy to this collaborative venture. As practising designers with significant understanding of the internationalisation of the discipline, the faculty are equally passionate about working with industry, both here in Ireland and abroad, and also hope to expand the work placement component by facilitating international placements in the future.

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