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2013

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Abstract

There is a perceived gap between traditional university education and a readiness to enter the workforce which is often addressed by the inclusion of a work-based learning experience within the undergraduate education process. The intention of the curriculum designers is that the work placement experience will provide learners with an opportunity to develop their employability skills and to apply the knowledge that they have gained within a practice setting. This practice-focused paper summarises the work conducted under the REAP (Roadmap for Employment-Academic Partnerships) project, illustrating existing practice in work placement and gathering input and experiences from higher education staff and employers. The aim of the work was to explore practice in work placement in undergraduate programmes in Ireland and to develop an outline guide to support good practice. The importance of the work placement interaction in contributing to the development of a broader more sustainable relationship is considered briefly. REAP is a collaborative project funded by the HEA (Higher Education Authority), involving a number of Higher Education institutions in Ireland aimed at developing systems and structures which support good practice in engagement interactions between higher education and enterprise.

The research into work placement practice was undertaken in a number of ways. Higher education staff were invited to partake in seminars and workshops. The employers participated mainly by way of a survey with some in-depth interviews providing deeper insights into work placement and other potential interactions.

The research allowed a generalised view of the work placement process to be developed and a series of stages with associated practice recommendations were identified. The importance of engagement with the employer before, during and after the placement process was highlighted and the role of the employer as a partner in the learning development underlined.

Keywords
Work placement, work-based learning, higher education, engagement with enterprise, academic industry partnerships

1 Introduction

The inclusion of periods in work in higher education pathways is not new. From the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, John Dewey, an educational reformer, believed that life and learning should be firmly integrated. He asserted that:

> *The inclination to learn from life itself and to make the conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living is the finest product of schooling* (Dewey, 1916: 51).

Dewey's ideas of experiential learning offer a firm basis for the value of learning through work experience. This means that workers, who are increasingly faced with novel and unpredictable work demands, must be able to learn on the job in dynamic and flexible ways as new requirements emerge.

While work placement learning has long been associated with various types of apprenticeships and on-the-job learning, some academic disciplines such as medicine and social work have included work placements as central elements in their programmes for many years. Jackson's (2006) research with work placement tutors revealed that the tutors perceived the learning potential of a work placement 'as being huge and varied'. The placement tutors observed that the diversity of learning, the fact that learning is contextualised and socialised, and the forms of learning (for example, emotional intelligence and coping with the unexpected) that are not generally recognised in traditional, disciplinary learning contexts all make the work placement an important complementary environment for learning.

Work placements have been defined in a number of ways, some more expansive than others. All definitions, however, include the key notion that work placements involve 'gaining experience on the job' and are now a recognised part of many third-level programmes. Coco (2000) suggested that work placements are a 'planned transition from the classroom to the job, and are a natural bridge between college and the work world'. In Britain, the Department for Education and Skills defined work placements as:

> *A planned period of work-based learning or experience, where the learning outcomes are part of a course or programme of study. This is usually provided outside the institution at which the student is enrolled.*

> *Work placements may be part of a sandwich course, a short placement, a work taster, temporary work or a period of supported employment as part of vocational training.*

<div align="right">(DfES, 2002: 2).</div>

2   Rationale for Placements

Most higher education institutions regard work placement as a key contributor to high academic standards, developing excellence in practice and to the employability of their graduates (Reddy and Moores, 2006; Little and Harvey, 2006). Research also shows that the students themselves value placements highly and appreciate the variety of learning opportunities that they present. Respondents from different disciplines and from diverse experiential settings confirm that work placements enhanced their understanding of career choices and provided a tangible link between theory and application (Walmsley *et al.*, 2006).

Tucker (2006) summarised that, in a workplace setting, students can engage in real work practices, learn how to communicate with colleagues and to deal with work related problems. Work placement provides a setting in which learning is less theory based and more practical and contextual. Complex situations, including people and problems with which the student can engage, are encountered within the work environment in a very different way than within the academic setting (Ayling, 2006).

Research conducted by Bowes and Harvey (2000) confirmed that students opting for degrees which contain placements are better placed for employment when they graduate compared with students who lack this experience, reflecting the conclusion that 'placements are seen by employers and graduate employees as the single most significant missing element of the majority of degree programmes' (Harvey *et al.,*1997).

The erosion of job security, globalisation of competition and change in the economic climate has also led to changing career directions and a new emphasis on employability and transferable skills. Employability is becoming a key benchmark for career success (Carbery and Garavan, 2005). Employability is generally regarded as a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and to be successful in their chosen occupations. Yorke and Knight (2004) posit that employability is a blend of understanding, practitioner skills, efficacy, beliefs (or legitimate self-confidence), and reflectiveness. The purpose of work placements has been variously described as gaining 'employability', acquiring 'transferable' or 'generic' skills, developing an understanding of world and work organisations, and an opportunity to apply theoretical learning within real world situations (Baird, 2005; Pickles, 1999).

Research by Herbert and Rothwell (2005) confirms a shift towards employability skills being increasingly important in the recruitment and selection of graduate employees. Their research highlighted the value of work-integrated learning, especially work-based placements, involving academic institutions and business organisations. Similarly, Morse (2006) and Fanthorne (2004) found that many organisations attach strategic importance to work-integrated learning by offering direct work experience to those who may be their future employees. In this way the employer cultivates a relationship with the higher education institution and with the learners with a view to developing a pipeline of talent.

In addressing the skills that graduates might be expected to have in the 21st Century Humber and van der Velden (2013) consider the dynamic nature of the workplace and the changing economic environment. They have identified six trends that impact on the transition from academia to work: the knowledge society, increasing uncertainty, the ICT revolution, high performance workplaces, globalisation and the change of the economic structure. These trends have had an impact on the range of expectations placed on the recent college graduate and create new skills demands. Humber and van der Velden (2013) have identified these new skills as, professional expertise, flexibility, innovation and knowledge management, mobilization of human resources, international orientation and entrepreneurship. Recognising the range of skills needed and considering the appropriate context within which the skills can be gained is a concern for higher education and

employers alike and it is clear that higher education institutions have neither the capability not the capacity to develop these skills in learners without the support and input of employers. Working together to design the programmes of study and contexts within which the knowledge skills and competence can be attained and evidenced the employer and the HEI can provide the graduate with the optimum outcomes in the short and longer term for the benefit of the learner, the employer and the higher education provider.

In a National Survey of Employers in Ireland (McGann and Anderson 2012), 89% of employers considered work placement as an important, or very important, part of the engagement between higher education and enterprise. In the same survey many employers called for more work placement within undergraduate courses, enhanced cooperation and collaboration between enterprise and academia across a range of opportunities and incorporation of more 'real life' skills within higher education courses for graduates. This points to the role of the employer as an active participant in the formation of the graduate rather than a passive recipient of the output of the higher education system.

3 Roadmap for Employment-Academic Partnership Project

The REAP project is a collaborative project aimed at developing and validating a model and roadmap for partnership and engagement between HEIs and employers and enterprises. This partnership approach is seen as especially relevant in the context of a dynamically changing economic and demographic environment. A review of the state of University-Business cooperation in Ireland stresses the importance of the development of relationships and suggests that a focus on greater effort to bring academics together with business, and the fostering of relationships, is needed for further improvement of this cooperation (Galan-Muros *et al.* 2013).

The REAP project began as a Cork Institute of Technology-led consortium comprising Athlone Institute of Technology; Dublin Institute of Technology; Institute of Technology, Sligo; Institute of Technology Tallaght; National University of Ireland, Galway; University College, Cork; and Waterford Institute of Technology. In more recent months several other higher education institutions have joined or associated with the consortium as it moves to become a broader national network.

The partnership concept is extended beyond that of the learning partnership. By exploring existing examples of good practice in higher education-industry interactions throughout the project consortium and identifying enablers and barriers, the work focuses on developing re-usable toolkits to support enhanced cooperation generally. . The impact is twofold: both HEIs and enterprises are encouraged to seek out opportunities to engage with each other and to identify any barriers to engagement within their systems and processes. Through the REAP project it is intended that enterprises will view HEIs as key service providers and strategic partners.

At an early stage in the project the higher education partners recognised that work placement is often the most common initial point of interaction between HEIs and indus-

try. An initial review of to explore the extent of work placement within third level programmes in Ireland was undertaken. Buckley and El Amoud (2010) examined the online course catalogues of Irish higher education institutions. They identified 411 courses that included a work-placement element from 23 higher education institutions in Ireland, with about 10,577 students undertaking placement in non-clinical programmes on an annual basis and almost 80% of these students enrolled on level 8 programmes. Their findings highlight significant variance in the number of programmes that include placement within institutions as well as significant variance in the prevalence of placement in the different academic disciplines. Placement duration was found to vary from less than two months to more than six months, with the number of credits available for the placement experience generally, but not always, reflecting the duration of the work.

3.1 Employer's view on Placement

The employer's view on placement was developed from a number of different sources. A short set of questions was designed to explore employers' views of the benefit of placement to their organizations, and the benefits to students, together with investigating methods through which the placement process might be improved. The survey was facilitated through Forfás, Ireland's policy advisory board for enterprise, trade, science, technology and innovation and made available through the IBEC (Irish Business Employers Confederation) website. In addition, all higher education project partners were asked to explore the views of the employers with whom they have contact using the same question set where appropriate and some in depth interviews were conducted with employers in the tourism sector in particular to ascertain their views.

Employers were clear that communication with the higher education institution could be improved:

> *Developing a contract or agreement is helpful. Regular communication between the college representative and a mentor in the business is also important to oversee and support the student.*

> *Active contact between providers and employers is required.*

> *Active interaction between the employer and the HEI at the beginning of the academic year is needed.*

> *Our placements are going well with our local third-level college, but, maybe we should have more communication from tripartite meetings, if possible.*

They also spoke about the opportunity to grow the interaction with the institution beyond the work placement itself:

> *We would welcome a chance to give a guest lecture on our organisation.*

> *No I hadn't thought about other interactions. But it would be great to see some sort of industry relevant research papers from the college – you know Cornell do a lot of research papers that are used in the industry and if a college could do*

that locally for Cork on tourism figures and benchmarking and so on it would be a help.

It would be great to work on other student projects payroll survey, recruitment survey, visitor surveys, interest groups, anything that would tie in with Failte Ireland research – your final year students could do these as project –

We hadn't considered the opportunities to promote education with our staff …

While the work placement interaction forms an important part of the learning pathway it would seem that this interaction is not being exploited in the context of broader interaction possibilities.

Compiling the input from a number of sources in summary the motivation for employers to be involved in placement included:

› Recruitment tool;

› Corporate responsibility;

› New skills and energy from students;

› Developing improved links with the HEI.

Employers' recommendations for improvement in the placement process related to:

› Longer duration of the placement;

› Improved communication between all parties;

› Greater preparation for placement;

› Clarity of expectations of all parties

3.2 Higher Education Staff view on Placement

A number of seminars were arranged by the REAP project team for higher education staff involved in placement and these seminars were attended by over 70 representatives from 14 Irish HEIs. The seminars were recorded and transcribed and key insights from work-placement practitioners in the HEIs were identified, from the contributions to these seminars.

The issues that were raised through the seminars, template responses, and fora can be summarised as follows:

› Importance of placement pedagogically;

› Mandatory requirement versus optional bonus;

› Variety and quality of placements;

› Alternatives to placement;

› Duration of placement;

› Number of credits;

› Assessment strategies,

› Difficulty in securing placement;

› Sourcing and securing international placements;

› Sourcing and securing placements for international students;

› Paid versus unpaid;

› Quality and suitability of available placements;

› Management of the placement process;

› Preparation of student and employer for placement;

› Resourcing of the placement process;

› IT support for placement and assessment processes.

While the placement professionals within higher education identified issues and challenges, the general view was that the placement experience provided an unrivalled opportunity for situated learning that academic institutions could not provide.

4   Framework for Good Practice in Work Placement

Partnership between higher education and employers is an important underlying concept for the development of work-based learning at all levels (Linehan, 2008). Research by Boud and Solomon (2001) suggests that there are six key characteristics for successful education-industry partnerships summarised as follows:

› The partnership must foster learning

› Learners must be in a contractual arrangement with the external organisation

› The programme should derive from the workplace and the needs of the learner

› Learners should engage in a process for recognition of competencies prior to undertaking the programme of study

› A significant element of the learning should be through projects undertaken in the workplace

› The assessment of the learning outcomes should be against a trans-disciplinary framework

In developing successful partnerships is it important that both partners have complementary aims, compatible missions, good relationships and clear responsibilities (Foskett, 2003). While working in partnership is not considered easy it is important that there is an opportunity for trust to develop and most researchers point to the importance of time in allowing the relationship to build and the potential benefits to accrue. According to Keithley and Redman (1997; 164) 'such benefits are not easily gained but are painstakingly accrued'. Despite the difficulties it is clear that if students are to be able

to make the transition from the classroom to the workplace and if the concerns expressed by the academics and employers involved in the placement process are to be addressed close partnerships need to be the basis on which a placement framework is built.

Working together through consideration of the findings and informed by international practice the REAP project team developed a set of guidelines to support improved work-placement processes. These guidelines recognize the importance of partnership in the process and provide a framework for good practice which addresses many of the issues and concerns raised in the research. The framework addresses the roles of the employer, the higher education institution and the student before, during and after the placement process and suggests formats for tripartite agreements and exchange of pertinent documentation in the form of packs 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 organizational learning and development of practice.

5   Conclusions and recommendations

In conclusion, the work of the REAP project consortium explores the practice surrounding work placement as an embedded element of higher education provision in Ireland. Extracting and analysing the employer perspective and the higher education provider perspective it is clear that the many benefits of student work placement outweigh the difficulties that are outlined.

Work placements provide many opportunities for HEIs and employers to work more closely together to contribute to the formation of graduates with the employability skills to make a successful and impactful transition into the workplace.

Increased global competition and evolving technological developments contribute to a changing and challenging work environment. Maintaining employability rather than employment will be a feature of the workplace challenges of the future. Working together higher education institutions and employers can foster the development of the agility and adaptability that graduates will require to make these transitions. The recommendations to improve the work placement process include better planning, enhanced communication processes and clarification of expectations at an early stage. The packs developed by the project consortium and disseminated through the website provide a useful frame work to support work placement.

While work placements form an important part of the interface between higher education and employers this research would seem to indicate that this opportunity is not well exploited and that higher education could do more to develop the interface and broaden the possibilities for interaction. Future work could more thoroughly explore the development of broader partnerships stemming from the work placement interactions and the optimum conditions to exploit these partnership developments.

Acknowledgements

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