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Participants Perspective of the FAS Redundant Placement Scheme

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TITLE
**“PARTICIPANTS PERSPECTIVE OF THE FAS REDUNDANT PLACEMENT
SCHEME”**

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to gather and analyze feedback from participants of a scheme which was put in place in the early stages of the Irish economic recession to provide work placements to redundant Apprentices. As part of the research for this paper a series of qualitative interviews were conducted with participants of the FAS Redundant Apprentice Placement Scheme (RAPS). FAS is the authority which organises and administers the Statutory Apprentice Scheme in Ireland. The scheme detailed in this study was put in place to aid Apprentices who has been made redundant, to complete phases 3,5 and 7 of their Apprenticeship. These are three of the four “on the job” phases of their training. A weekly allowance is paid to participating Apprentices for the duration of the placement. Redundant Apprentices and Employers must meet a specific set of criteria to qualify for participation in the scheme, these are designed to protect the participants and to prevent unscrupulous employers from using the scheme as a method of accessing cheap labour. A selection of themes were identified in the data gathered during the interviews, these were separated and grouped under specific headings. The analysis of the data gathered during these interviews provides an interesting insight into the learning experiences of the participating redundant apprentices.

The findings highlighted that a large proportion of the participants had many positive learning experiences, however they also indicated that they felt that they would have benefited more from the scheme if more opportunities were available to engage in a greater variety of learning tasks. This paper would suggest that the participating Apprentices could learn more if they were placed with a greater variety of companies, this could provide them with a broader range of learning experiences.

Keywords: *Apprentice Education, Work Placement, Workplace Education.*

1. Introduction

The subjects of this study were Apprentices studying at the College of Engineering and the Built Environment in the Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland [1]. The Apprentices were studying in a variety of disciplines such as Metal Fabrication, Sheetmetal Work, Aircraft Maintenance, and Bricklaying. This study sought to gather and analyze feedback from these students who were participants of a scheme which was put in place in the early stages of the Irish economic recession to provide work placements to redundant Apprentices. A series of qualitative interviews were conducted with participants of the FAS Redundant Apprentice Placement scheme (RAPS)[2]. FAS is the authority which organises and administers the Statutory Apprentice Scheme in Ireland. The scheme detailed in this study was put in place by the then Minister for Social Protection Joan Burton in late 2008. The scheme initially focused on the trades of Carpentry and Joinery, Plastering, Plumbing, Electrical and Bricklaying. Its purpose was to aid Apprentices who have been made redundant, to complete phases 3, 5 and 7 of their Apprenticeship. These are three of the four "on the job" phases of their training. Both redundant Apprentices and employers must meet a specific set of criteria to qualify for participation in the scheme. These were put in place to protect the Apprentices from unscrupulous employers and to ensure the employers had adequate staff and facilities to allow the Apprentice to satisfy their learning needs for the phase in question. Participants in the study were interviewed and the data gathered was analysed. A selection of themes were identified in the data gathered, these were separated and grouped under specific headings. The analysis of the data gathered during these interviews provides an interesting insight into the learning experiences of the participating redundant apprentices.

2. Rationale

This small scale research project stemmed from an informal discussion between the three authors. The discussion centered on the unfortunate circumstances in which many of their students had found themselves due to the dramatic downturn in the Irish economy. Many had to wait for long periods to secure placements on the RAPS scheme. Following their period of training on the scheme they had been called to attend the "off the job phases" of their Apprenticeships at our college. During informal conversations with these students while they were attending college, they highlighted some aspects of the RAPS scheme which they found conducive to their learning and some which they did not. Although they were extremely grateful for the opportunity to progress through their training, they indicated that they felt that some elements of the scheme could be improved. As a group, the authors considered this case to be worthy of investigation. The authors set about the task of designing the project, gathering and analyzing the data, and presenting the findings.

3. Research Design

This research has been carried out from the position of a pragmatic world view. Pragmatists focus on the research question or situation and allow it to inform the procedures, methods and techniques of the research that best meet their needs and purposes. Creswell, (2009) [3]. The case study approach was best suited to this design of research methodology. For this research the “case” is regarded as being the exploration of the students perspective of the scheme in question. Henn et al, (2010) [4]. Suggest that cases are units of investigation..individuals..communities..groups Stake, (1995) [5]. does not see the case study as a method, but suggests that both single and mixed research methods inform the case, he offers that, Case is not the method, it is the object of study. Yin, (2009,) [6]. holds the view that, “a case study is an empirical study that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and with its real-life context”. Qualitative interviews were conducted with apprentices who took part in the RAPS Scheme.

4. Student Interviews

The authors selected a series of open ended questions which they considered would meet the aim of the project. Some of the participants were interviewed in person, and some over the telephone. Among the questions asked were some general questions about the apprentices participation, such as “Do you think you could have progressed your apprenticeship without the RAPS scheme?” and, “Did your experience on the scheme improve your chances of finding employment? If yes how?” Some more focussed questions were also included which relating to the learning required for the completion of the on the job phases of the apprenticeship. They enquired as to whether the participants were satisfied that all of the learning outcomes met? The participant was requested to elaborate on their answer to this question and were asked for suggestions as to how they felt the scheme could be improved. It should be noted that seventy percent of the learning outcomes for the phase must be achieved before the apprentice can progress to the next phase. The interview enquired as to whether all one hundred percent of the learning outcomes were covered during the on the job phases.

5. Analysis, Findings and Recommendations

Analysis

The methodology for the coding the qualitative data into themes, which is championed by Taylor and Gibbs (2010) [9], was selected for the analysis of the qualitative data for this research. The notes taken during the student interviews were collated and the responses to each individual question were extracted and grouped together in a separate document generated specifically for analysis of the data. This facilitated the analysis of the data one question at a time. Sections of text from the collated notes were highlighted and identified with common key words which when grouped became the codes. These codes were subjected to further scrutiny and were assembled under the four main emerging themes.

Seidel (1998) [10] describes the basic process of qualitative data analysis as being cyclical in nature and consisting of three parts, noticing, collecting and thinking about interesting things. As the data was read, items were noticed and listed, these lead to further searching of the text for similar or related items and then their collection. The thinking involved in the examination of these resulted in the cycle starting over again.

Some findings,

90% of the participants indicated that they felt that they would not have been able to progress in their apprenticeship without the aid of the RAPS scheme.

85 % indicated that they had many positive learning experiences while involved with the scheme and greatly appreciated the opportunity to learn and progress, however 70% of the participants indicated that they felt that not all of the learning outcomes were covered during their on the job phases.

80% indicated that they felt better equipped to find employment having participated in the scheme. Many indicated that participation in the scheme helped them to acquire the essential skills required to be a competent tradesperson. This scheme ultimately equipped them to get the formal qualifications required to travel abroad to find employment.

Some recommendations,

If it was possible to arrange the RAPS scheme so that the participants spent their on the job phases with greater variety of employers, it might have resulted in more, if not all of the learning outcomes being met.

Some participants indicated that where employers could not be found to accommodate apprentices the state should endeavor to arrange this accommodation in training centers and Institutes of Technology, where the learning could be combined with the provision of much needed services to the local community.

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