From placement to academic meltdown: a qualitative study of student experience in the transition from third year work placement back to fourth year academic study.

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2015

From Placement to Academic Meltdown: a qualitative study of student experience in the transition from third year work placement back to fourth year academic study

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ABSTRACT: Placements perform a valuable role in enhancing discipline-relevant skill sets, improving confidence and making students more employable. A declining trend in placement uptake may be due to problems experienced with the transition back into university, primarily with getting back into sync with studying and engaging with academic requirements. In this study the transition experience of two groups of placement students returning to the Robert Gordon University (RGU) was explored through in-depth qualitative interviews. Students who had undertaken a workshop as part of the Business Creativity module (BCM) prior to starting fourth year felt more prepared for the transition than their counterparts who went straight from placement into fourth year. This study concludes that placement students should be offered a tailored induction through workshops prior to re-commencing to adapt their mind set and re-engage with the academic process to help them succeed in their final year.

1.0   Introduction:

The purpose of this study is to provide clearer insight into students' perceptions of readjustment back into academic life after work-based placement, exploring their ability to engage with their final year of studies. Some authors suggest students find re-adjustment back into academic life difficult, although no conclusive evidence was presented (Paisey and Paisey, 2010), with much of the work reviewed focusing primarily on numeric analysis of grade achievements and general questionnaires providing overviews of findings (Mansfield, 2011;Juznic and Pymm, 2014; Driffield et al 2011).

This study sought a deeper level of understanding of the personal journeys these students faced in the transition from workplace to the academic rigours of their final year. Whilst the literature suggests that engaging in placement drives improvements in academic performance and higher levels of degree classifications, this study examines the pressures, insights and feelings of the students in their engagement back into academic life, identified as an important focus by Kandiko and Mawer (2012) who outlined a requirement to engage with students' perceptions of their academic experience and to integrate these with quality assurance structures.

Focusing on the experience of students engaging in a European-wide Business Creativity Module (BCM) taught at RGU, this study analyses the experience that placement students had reintegrating back into university and compared those who had attended an intensive week-long academic workshop pre-semester, linked to the module, and those that entered the final year in a traditional manner. The aim was to identify whether an academically focused early-stage intervention can enhance students' experience. An outline is provided of the critical factors students felt assisted them in the transition from workplace back into the academic environment.

2.0   Literature

Placements, internships or sandwich courses are intended to enable students to gain crucial skills in a work-based setting, facilitated through experiential learning (Ruhanen et al 2013). The Dearing Report (1997) emphasised the importance of universities providing undergraduate students with opportunities for work placements to enhance their employability. The Department for Business Innovation (BIS 2009 p.40) highlighted the need for more work-based learning in order to equip 'Britain's workforce for a global economy.' 82% of employers similarly wanted universities to focus on the development of student employability skills (CBI 2009). Placements have become an essential part of the undergraduate student experience, designed to provide experiences to enhance employability (Auburn 2007).

Universities and researchers have found that work placements increase the employability of undergraduates and contribute to higher academic standards (Little and Harvey 2006, Reddy and Moores 2006; Brooks 2012; Blackwell et al 2001). Universities' performance is judged by the employability of their graduates (Balta et al 2012) and the provision of placements allows universities to enhance their competitive position in the student 'market place' (E4E, 2011). RGU in Aberdeen has a long and successful track-record in this respect, with 90% of the courses delivered in Aberdeen Business School alone providing an opportunity for placement.

However students' uptake of placement opportunities across the higher education sector has been on a downward trend (E4E, 2011; Bullock et al, 2009; BIS, 2012), cited to be linked to issues related to students finding applying for positions challenging, the financial burden, a lack of confidence in undertaking a placement and concerns regarding the transition back to university, such as housing, friendship groups, 'getting out of sync' with studying and a lack of motivation for further study (Hejmadi et al 2012 p.609, Reddy and Moores 2006;Little and Harvey 2006). There is no doubt that placements provide valuable benefits to students undertaking them (Cooper et al, 2009; E4E, 2011; Brooks, 2012). Employers and students acknowledge that placements help to develop students' transferable skills, numeracy, communication, learning and IT skills, alongside discipline based skills (Little and Harvey 2006; Reddy and Moores 2006; Mandilaras 2004). The transferable skills students gain on placement can contribute to their final year at university and improve their academic performance, improving their ability to work in teams, better time and project management, entrepreneurial and leadership skills (Little and Harvey 2006), interpersonal, negotiation and problem solving skills (Balta et al 2012).

Students perceive placements to be valuable in improving their career prospects, allowing them to apply academic learning in an industry environment (Blackwell et al 2001; Walmsley et al 2006). They also teach them tacit skills required in the workplace such as customer service skills, giving them hands-on experience of the industries in which students wish to study and let them explore potential careers (Parilla and Hesser 1998). The skills gained from placement allow an easier transition from education into the workplace (Cooper et al, 2009; Ruhanen et al 2013) as employers seek graduates immediately capable of contributing to their business (Brooks, 2012). However some studies have raised questions around a perceived dip in self-perception of competence amongst students returning to studies, (Kettis et al 2013), thus raising the question of how universities can help to further support students' confidence to perform and achieve the maximum outcome for their degree programme.

Placements can contribute to academic performance by providing opportunities to apply the theory gained in practice in the workplace (Balta 2012, Busby 2003). There are some who see placements as enhancing learning: students develop a higher level of cognitive ability to

learn, as they 'learn-to-learn' during their placements (Stanley 2013). Furthermore this learning can be translated back into their academic environment, with a more mature outlook having been developed during their placement (Mendez and Rona, 2010). Research on the effects of placement reported that students had a more positive attitude towards learning at university (Blackwell et al 2001, Hejmadi 2012), were more motivated to study, engaged with the learning tasks more actively and were prepared to read more widely and critique taught material (Little and Harvey 2006).

Increased student confidence and maturity through the placement experience is a recurring theme throughout the literature (Mandilaras 2004; CBI 2009). This increased confidence manifests itself back at university with improved written and communications skills and an improved performance in soft skills assessments such as presentations (Hejmadi et al 2012). Edwards (2014) and Cooper et al (2009) found that students also had improved self-efficacy following placement and felt more confident in applying for jobs. A key focus in this research is related to the academic attainment of students undertaking placements, with many reviewing profiles of grades before and after placements and in final year studies. Studies have shown both that placement students do gain better grades (Hejmadi et al 2012; Mansfield 2011; Mendez and Rona 2010; Reddy and Moores 2006) and that their grades did not improve (Duignan 2002). Some supported this data on academic achievement with other forms of qualitative research (Brooks, 2012; Bullock et al, 2009), however much of this research focused heavily on the outcome of the placement in developing skills which were applied on return to university and no indication was given of feelings of readiness for the increased academic rigour students faced. A key criticism of results that show higher academic attainment is that placement students could already be higher-achieving individuals (Driffield et al 2011; Mansfield 2011; Bullock et al, 2009).

Ruhanen et al's (2013) qualitative study of students' experiences on tourism placements is a pertinent study to review due to its use of interviews. It identified that students felt they benefitted from learning a range of tacit skills and relating their own course-based knowledge to the industry itself, thus increasing their levels of satisfaction and confidence. Whilst encouraging to see studies that focused on developing a clearer understanding of students' experiences and subsequent satisfaction with placement opportunities, the depth of understanding as to its importance or impact on students' return to their host institutions is still lacking. Indeed conclusions in Ruhanen et al's study focus on what institutions should be doing to ensure readiness of their students going into their placements, at the expense of considering readiness for integration back into an academic setting, which this study seeks to explore.

Some studies look at the transition of students back into university from placement but this is an under-researched area (Auburn 2007). The Dearing Report (1997) recommended that the practical experiences students gained should be related to theoretical learning and students should be encouraged to reflect on their experiences and the skills developed. Studies have found that the transition phase was not effective and students were dissatisfied on their return, with their placement experience not being utilised in lectures and seminars (Auburn 2007). Fell and Kuit (2003) found that there was little attempt to integrate students back into study. Auburn (2007) argued that the placement should not be viewed as a 'magic ingredient' that improved employability but that the role transition model of supervised work experience should be adopted. Placements should be viewed as part of the developmental process of the student and, as such, the preceding components and the subsequent transition of the student back into university should be managed in order to maximise the impact overall. He refers to Mann (2001) who identified the transition from school to university as an alienating experience and states that the transition from placement to university could be classified as an equally if not a more alienating experience for the student, with dissatisfaction often being due to poor management of this transition. Students had a negative view of this transition as they felt they were regulated by academics and not

able to talk about what they had learnt on placement. This could be remedied if the curriculum was linked intentionally to the placement experiences, highlighting how imperative it is that these placements be integrated effectively into their respective programmes of education to enhance credibility and impact (Kettis et al, 2013).

Bullock et al (2009) identified that only 10% of students found the move from university to placement difficult, whilst a far greater number (over half in some cases) highlighted difficulties in the subsequent move back into university life: this response seems largely driven by social and study group factors, but would be interesting to explore further. Is it simply the contrast of the move from one way of working to another, or a more impactful result of the transition from the more practical focus of working life into the more theoretical constructs expected of academic engagement? This is a critical question within this particular study as students being interviewed were moving from a 3rd year placement to their final year of study upon which their honours degree classification depended..

3.0   The Study

3.1   Context: COEUR Workshop

The data for this study is based around students who undertook an elective module in the fourth year of their BA(Hons) Management and Creative Industries courses at RGU. They all undertook a year-long placement in their third year, so were outwith the university environment for a prolonged period of time. The module is a Business-focused Creativity module (BCM) where students are grouped in cross-cultural and disciplinary teams to enhance their creative output. This module is part of a wider initiative delivered by a consortium of universities across Europe named COEUR (www.coeur-module.eu). Annually five students from each participating university are given the opportunity to undertake part of their assessment (pitching the business idea) in an intensive week-long workshop before semester commences.

Anecdotal evidence gathered by the researchers over 6 years of iterations of this module was a driving factor for this study. Students freely shared their feelings of lack of preparedness for what was expected of them in their final year of studies, raising the question 'Do those students who undertake a summer workshop, focusing their mind and skills on the transition back into fourth year, at the very least commence their studies with an increased appreciation of what to expect'? Furthermore, engagement with both students who did, and those who did not undertake the workshop, allowed an exploration of what universities could be doing for students who wish to engage with placement routes to increase tacit and work-based skills, whilst not disadvantaging them academically.

3.2   Method

To develop a deeper understanding of students' feelings of readiness to recommence studies it was important to adopt an interpretive approach where students explored the narrative of their experiences (Bryman and Bell 2015). This was achieved through qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews, allowing the researchers to explore fully the views and experiences of the students, whilst also developing an understanding of the impact that the overarching themes identified from the literature had on these students (Bryman, 2008), thus developing real insight to the narrative around the students' transition experiences.

After extensive review of the literature, a semi-structured interview schedule sought to explore the experiences of placement students who studied BCM, so involving students engaging on a similar platform, allowing a more accurate reflection across their experiences. A purposive sampling method was used to ensure a sample of both students undertaking the workshop and those going straight into their final year of studies (Bryman and Bell, 2015). As such, the sample size was determined by the number of placement students who had

engaged in the COEUR workshop (six) and the eight students who did not (coded as C and NC respectively in the analysis). The researchers focused on students having undertaken this experience in the past two academic cycles to ensure their ability to access and reflect on accurate memories related to their experiences and resultant feelings.

Interviews were conducted through a mix of 'face-to-face' and telephone methods, largely driven by the geographic dispersal of students. Duration of interviews ranged anywhere up to 38 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed by the researchers. Due to the focused number of interviews conducted they were transcribed and coded manually and researchers sought to adopt thematic analysis to allow exploration of the subthemes identified within the literature's central themes (Bryman, 2008).

The authors recognise that there are limitations to this study primarily due to it being focused on a small sample of students in one institution. It is recommended that this study be replicated in other institutions which provide similar academic workshops pre final year to validate the findings on a larger scale.

4.0   Findings/discussion

4.1   Placement Skills Development

For the majority of students the rationale for undertaking a placement was to enhance their employability and NC1 was typical of the respondents who engaged with this route to 'give more context to my CV'. NC3 felt that 'graduating with a year's work experience' gave the student a 'huge edge' in terms of employability, which agrees with Brooks (2012).

There was a sense that academic study was not sufficient alone to secure a graduate job and that the placement helped to provide students with the life skills they required, which agrees with the findings of Little and Harvey 2006, rather than developing their cognitive skills which related to the academic experience, which disagrees with Stanley (2013).

There was a real sense of positive appreciation of the experiences, skills and abilities that students felt that they had gained in relation to placements. Students outlined the acquisition of skills and abilities that were identified in the literature, ranging from; communication, organisational, time management, leadership, team-working, problem solving and IT skills to the ability to self-reflect, to work under pressure, to resolve conflicts and to work in multi-cultural settings, along with technical skills specific to certain roles. Overall the skills focused very much around the idea of gaining 'real life experience' and there seemed a lack of engagement with what this could mean for these students on their return to university. However students did acknowledge, in line with the literature, that the increased levels of maturity, self-confidence, self-discipline and work ethic gained from undertaking a placement helped them to engage with the demands of studying at university again much more effectively.

This factor of skill development was probed further, seeking to identify what, despite their positive experiences, these students saw as being key issues in their undertaking a placement. This is where the issues of return to academic life began to become apparent. Challenges ranged from more practical issues of coming back to find accommodation and reintegrating with university life and reference groups, to more academically based issues as identified by Hejmadi et al 2012. At this point terms such as 'difficulty in the transition' and 'going back was difficult' became very apparent. NC4 stated that she 'forgot to be a student' and C6 admitted that it was 'difficult to get back into the routine.' Some even identified that it was like they had regressed somewhat and it was like going into school for the first time. NC7 stated 'I felt like a 1st year again, I did not know where anything was. I forgot where rooms were'.

In all there was a real sense of students struggling with a range of 'daunting' factors including; not expecting such a significant increase in work level, time pressures to prepare courseworks and exams, report writing styles, library searching and referencing after having been so distant from it over a relatively long period of time, not being able to gauge the level and depth required when critiquing, for example, and even small factors such as how long it takes to prepare and write academic work. C4 identified that, 'you get a momentum built up until second year and it stops whilst on placement. You have kind of lost that momentum a little bit'.

Whilst students had to write a report whilst on placement there was an indication that they did not have time to do this and did not focus fully on the academic requirements. Some felt that students undertaking a taught third year might have had an added benefit of experiencing that year of increased academic expectations where NC2 felt that, '….when you come back it's a big step up [..], Where you are in second year to where they expect you to be in fourth year is quite a big difference maybe more so than those students that do stay here'. Many students referred to the significant 'step up' or 'massive jump' to fourth year. However there was no evidence to suggest this would deter students from engaging with the placement due to its value to their personal and CV development. Furthermore it is worth highlighting that those who demonstrated stronger friendship groups, and as such support networks, reflected more positively on how they dealt with the issues highlighted.

4.2   Placement Contribution to Fourth Year Studies

An important consideration identified was in relation to what these students perceived that engaging with placement provided to their final year of studies. Some felt that their level of confidence and maturity had been improved in their time away as the CBI (2009) study found, again this related very much to more tacit skills such as an ability to communicate in groups, and having had a break from the rigours of university life. When questioned further on what this meant for them in respect of their readiness or preparedness for their final year the picture looked very different. There was a real sense that being away for a prolonged period of time may have had a detrimental effect on their abilities in an academic context because they were 'out of sync with academic studies' and needed to 're-sync' as highlighted by Hejmadi et al 2012. C1 stated that, 'I must admit I don't think it prepared me at all for coming into fourth year'. NC3 found it hard to 'switch your mind that you are back to being a student' and NC8 had to adjust to using 'parts of your brain that you have not used in a year.' This student failed their first coursework on his return because 'I had not hit the ground running quickly enough. I was still in placement mode.'

Others felt that being out of the academic environment made them feel more prepared to continue following an industry route, but that they were driven by the need to gain their qualification to further recognise and validate the expertise they had learned on placement. Some suggested that placement contributed more towards motivating them, as they now knew what they wanted to achieve post-university and as such, it helped them to focus on their studies in their final year.

4.3   Contribution of COEUR Workshop

Whilst students undertaking the COEUR workshop also highlighted a range of concerns in line with the findings above around the return to their final year, there was a recognition of the contribution that this academic workshop provided. Rationale for attending ranged from the opportunity to meet new people, to learning in a different environment, to reducing workload as it contributed 30% to the final module grade, however most did not highlight this as a driver. Again, the students identified a range of tacit skills that the workshop contributed to their development, in line with those identified in respect of placement overall. However when asked to consider this in respect of commencing their final year a range of

new, and academically-focused factors became apparent, including; getting back into developing university level presentations, having them consider the theoretical underpinning required of academic life and giving them an insight into the level required of their academic studies. There was a resounding sense of being given a head-start because they had engaged earlier in considering what their final year of studies would bring, making them realise the importance of being ready for the year ahead.

A statement capturing the sense of what these students were identifying was, 'It got us back into the class routine way of thinking, which obviously being in work for a year and working you're not really used to… gave me a head-start into what I could expect coming back' (C1). C6 claimed the workshop 'eased you in a bit more gently' into the fourth year.

It was identified by many as being an experience that enhanced both their confidence and readiness for starting semester which students who went straight into Semester One did not seem to have. All felt this was a very positive experience for their fourth year. C2 believed, '..if I hadn't done it I would be panicking even more' - panic which institutions should seek to mitigate against for students. Whilst C4 felt that it, 'makes you feel more positive'.

Whilst somewhat subjective, students who did not engage with the workshop were asked to reflect on what they felt this may have contributed. There was a sense that this could have proved beneficial, in terms of preparing them for the expectations of their final year, whilst helping them in the transition back by engaging with theories and applying them. NC7 stated 'it gets you started a little bit earlier and gets you thinking about things a bit earlier'.

4.4   Readiness for Semester to Commence

There was unease at the level of readiness for 'the big jump…..to the next level…' (C3) going back into fourth year. C1 considered that 'going into fourth year was a complete struggle for me with referencing and everything, in respect of academic writing, all these words that keep coming up for critically analysing and I don't understand what it really means'.

Whilst not all students who undertook the COEUR workshop felt fully ready to recommence their studies there was certainly a sense that they were more prepared than their non-workshop counterparts. The COEUR students suggested that engagement in an academic-based environment got them back into the right mind-frame, and the intensive structure of the workshop allowed them to consider the impact the increased workload may have on them, thus allowing them to start semester in a more prepared manner. C6 claimed that the workshop 'got your brain back into action' and made them more organised for going back. Furthermore many recognised that as they moved into Semester Two these worries eased, as such highlighting that engagement at critical points with the academic focus required can help their feelings of preparedness and thus reduce anxiety.

There was a sense that students felt a lack of support from the university. Many felt they were treated equitably to those coming from the third year but that their unique needs had not been identified or considered. NC3 echoed the views of placement students 'everyone gets lumped back together rather than acknowledge differences between those that are very accustomed to academic life and those who are almost new to it again.' Whilst all had placement tutors, not all felt this enhanced their engagement with academic life, and there was a strong desire for more direction on what is expected of fourth year. The output of placement and its impact on their readiness for Semester One was summarised by C3 'For getting a job it is positive but it doesn't prepare you for fourth year I think possibly if you just stayed at uni you would find the jump more a steady upward hill whereas this just seemed to be a cliff', resulting in a sense of placement being beneficial for the future career, but overall a mixed range of largely neutral and negative impacts when focusing on their preparedness for academic studies.

Whilst students did tend to feel that they were able to reflect on and apply theories that they had developed in their time at university whilst on placement, many felt that the reverse was not true and that they were not encouraged by staff once back at university to reflect on their placement experiences in class. Some did identify dissertation topics and examples for the exams from the their placement experiences, but there were many that felt that the placement experience was very distinct from university life itself, and that a better integration of the experience overall in their learning environment may well have allowed the opportunity to engage with the academic context more effectively.

5.0   Recommendations Presented

Recommended support evolving from the research included; classes or workshops specifically for placement students to get them back into the academic way of thinking, with a specific focus on aspects such as professional communications skills, report writing, referencing, researching and exam preparation; presentations and workbooks that outline the expectations and level of work required, highlighting the types of issues and challenges that placement students might experience (and how they may mitigate against these), and providing a better understanding for these students of what exactly the jump in expectations looks like.

Students also wanted guidance on who they can turn to, such as support groups or mentors that can guide them in how to become prepared. They require support in developing critical skills (critiquing of academic models and literature being a particular issue) that they can use when writing course-works and dissertations. Additionally, a more effective way for these students to reflect back on their placement experiences in their modules is required rather than this becoming a distinct experience which is separate from their academic life (those that did use placement as an opportunity to identify a dissertation topic found topics much easier and more enjoyable).

Some students identified a desire for work conducted in their third year studies to count towards their fourth year outcome, and the formulation of a dissertation proposal whilst on placement would give them a head-start when recommencing their studies. Others suggested providing further distance-learning opportunities for placement students so they continued to engage with the academic requirements of the university.

Other considerations for the authors, in respect of the COEUR workshop, could involve including part of the workshop focused on the students' coursework for BCM so providing a boost in their critical writing skills and abilities, ahead of term commencing. Furthermore, as BCM is offered to another cohort of students in Semester Two at a third year level, it would be feasible to offer these placement students the opportunity to engage in the module via distance-learning, allowing them to explore the expectations of critical analysis for a module like this. As was highlighted by C3, fourth year currently 'seems to be a cliff ', which is exacerbated by these students not being identified as different in terms of their understanding of what fourth year brings, and the university should seek to provide them with an all important, '…bridge between placement and going back into fourth year' (NC1).

6.0   Conclusions

It was clear that students undertaking the COEUR workshop, or those who had engaged with support available via the Study Skills Team, did feel that there was some level of support for placement students on their return. It was also clear that there was a real appetite amongst most students for a more enhanced level of support, focused on getting them back into an academic mind-set.

As these students are at a crucial point in their academic careers, with their final year defining their degree classification and thus industry's perceptions of them, coupled with the

fact that these students found the move from first semester into second a much less daunting and impactful process, is it not then the responsibility of institutions to ensure that interventions are put into place during this transition to ensure the maximum outcome for these students, thus supporting them in achieving their full potential for their future careers? And is there a need for a more focused attempt to keep these students engaged with university requirements whilst on placement, rather than this being viewed as a separate part of their life, from which they have to progress to ultimately achieve the final qualification they are seeking to develop? The authors believe the recommendations presented could be the way forward.

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