

*“I know what to expect next time...”:*

*How Valuable is “short project” Placement Experience to Higher Education Students?*

**Abstract**

Much of the research into Higher Education and its role in work-based learning, and especially in supporting undergraduate students on placements, has focussed on longer term internships and sandwich courses. Research has also concentrated on subject areas that have traditionally been associated with the above; for example Business, Health, and Engineering. By contrast, the aim of this study was to gather data from students on a much shorter period of placement categorised as a ‘short project’ (Brennan and Little, 1996). In addition the data recovered was from students studying within the social sciences paradigm, undertaking an undergraduate degree in Education Studies (not teacher training). The social sciences and humanities more generally have not been discussed to any great extent within the context of research on placement or work-based learning; the subject area of Education Studies is not covered little by previous research. The results suggest that even a relatively short period of structured placement can be of significant benefit to students and provide them with an opportunity to assess their career direction and gain valuable experience. The paper also considers to what extent this type of placement can be applied to other subject areas within Higher Education.

**Key Words:**

Placement; work-based learning; Higher Education.

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**Introduction**

The aim of this research is to inform understanding of Higher Education (HE) students’ placement experiences outside of the more traditional year-long sandwich/internship model. Research and teaching in the United Kingdom relating to work experience and placements in Higher Education has mainly focussed on longer term internships and sandwich courses. With this approach undergraduate students take up to a

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year out of their studies to work within a business or organisation that meets their career aspirations; thus gaining experience within their chosen field and increasing their employability. This may or may not be accredited as a formal part of their studies or acknowledged in their final transcripts. In the past, typical subject areas that have encouraged this form of work-based learning (WBL) included Business and Management, Engineering, and Languages. There has been less attention paid to shorter periods of placement at HE level (see Wilson, 2009, for some discussion), as well as a lack of acknowledgement of a much wider range of subject areas; in addition it has been suggested that learning on placement is under researched (Murakami, 2009, 14).

The focus of this research falls within Brennan and Little's 'Short Project' category in their taxonomy of 'experience-led work based learning' (1996, 7). The arts, business, languages, science and engineering are highlighted by the authors; many students in the health professions also undertake placement and field work as an important part of their studies. The social sciences more generally are not represented at all in Brennan and Little's taxonomy and appear to feature relatively little in subsequent research. However, Shaw's (2012) research on female Education Studies students and the importance of vocational routes and experiences does help inform many of the themes outlined here. This paper aims to shed light on under-researched aspects of work experience at Higher Education level by focussing on (i) students' placement experiences within a 'short project' framework approach to work-based learning, (ii) a course positioned within the social sciences paradigm. A search through the United Kingdom's Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS, <http://www.ucas.com/>) web site revealed around 100 HE institutions offering Education Studies at Undergraduate level, frequently as a Joint Honours award paired with a National Curriculum subject or another complementary subject such as Childhood Studies, Sociology, or Community and Youth Studies, for example. It should be noted that these courses are *not* a form of teacher training leading to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). They form an academic discipline in their own right and many graduates enter into a wide range of careers that are both education-related and outside of the profession; further discussions on students and their choice of Education Studies as an academic discipline is provided by Shaw (2011).

Data on the student experience was collected in one post-1993 institution in England. Students were required to undertake a second year dedicated placement module over a 6 month period. Typically students undertook placement for one day a week over a period of between eight and sixteen weeks, depending upon the demands and flexibility of the organisation offering placement and the students' other timetable commitments. Students were required to accrue a minimum of a total of 50 hours on placement, but many did considerably more. Unlike sandwich courses, the full time students in this study were expected to continue with the rest of their campus-based studies at the same time as undertaking and completing their placement. This approach to WBL is arguably less intensive than a sandwich year, which may result in working full time for an organisation for up to twelve months. However, in this instance, students faced the challenge of accumulating work-based experience whilst at the same time meeting the demands of their full time campus-based studies. The placement forms part of a credited-bearing module for students;

part of a three year full time undergraduate degree programme. The module design reflects Duignan's (2002) recommendation for a 'formal-structure' model of placement, as opposed to a laissez-faire approach. During the placement students are required to attend a series of 'traditional' lectures and undertake on-line formative tasks as part of a blended approach that includes other learning activities. The module is underpinned with theories of critical reflection (Schon, 1991; Gibbs, 1988; Kolb, 1984) that students study and employ as part of their personal and professional development. Typically, many of the students are interested in education-related careers, although not exclusively teaching.

The focus of the placement experience (and therefore the module) is centred on the following: providing an opportunity for students to consider how their studies articulate theory with policy and practice; a consideration of ethical perspectives within their placement settings; developing a structured 'Action Plan' to work to and report back on; opportunities to apply theories of reflection on a regular basis in ways that inform their practice; providing an opportunity to inform their career trajectory and increase their employability. Within the context of this approach the research aimed to develop a clearer understanding of students' experiences on placement and explore how this relates to wider issues of academic support, implications for career guidance and to what extent students feel they benefit from their (relatively shorter) period of work placement.

## **The Literature**

Placements have been a 'common feature' (Bennett et al, 2008, p.105) of undergraduate degree programmes in the UK for more than 40 years. It is becoming increasingly recognised that work-based learning (WBL) in Higher Education is emerging as 'a distinct field of practice, supported by relevant pedagogies and concepts of curriculum' and that universities are more than ever turning their attention to work experience and graduate employability (Lester and Costley, 2010, 561; Mason et al, 2003). More recently, the importance of work experience has been commented upon, but whilst there has been a decline in the practice of placement, short period 'internships' have become increasingly popular (Wilson, 2012, 37-39).

Taxonomies have also been developed that help contextualise the different approaches to WBL. For example the Wilson review (2012, 37-41) discusses the value of sandwich courses, placements, the 'consortium model', 'short period' internships and extra-curricular activities. Brennan and Little (1996, 7) outline a 'spectrum' of work-based learning across seven categories from 'brief encounter' to 'continuing professional development'. Blackwell et al (2001, 281-282) highlight three main types of work experience within a Higher Education context: organised but external to the study programme, ad hoc experience external to the study programme, and organised work experience that is part of the study programme. Reports published in 2001 and in 2009 highlight how interest in a variety of WBL opportunities has grown (Wilson, 2009, 2). Undergraduates also appreciate the opportunity to gain experience and skills in a placement that generally have a 'positive effect'

on students (Murakami et al, 2009, 14). Foster and Stephenson (1998) outline different definitions that consider placements, sandwich courses, work experiences and WBL for students, and WBL for employees. Research into placement experiences can be directed in a number of different ways. For example Crebert et al (2004) categorise three approaches: the value of the placement to the student, academic staff's perceptions of placement, and benefits to students in terms of their careers. Thus at one end of this spectrum students become learners at work with the idea that the placement 'services' the academic course; at the other end the focus is on the needs of employers and employees.

Originally, good practice guides focussed primarily on 1-year placements developed over many years (for example sandwich courses), however, 'it is now widely recognised that work-based learning can usefully take place in much shorter time periods' (Wilson, J. 2009, 5; Wilson, T. 2012). Research also suggests that 'spending some months in employment—will usually improve the labour market situation for some of the graduates to some extent ... The biggest positive impacts were found to be associated with work done over a longer period (over 8 months) and related to their studies' (Blasko, 2002, p.48, cited in Smith et al, 2007). More generally, the value to students of placements and experiential learning has been highlighted: 'there is significant anecdotal evidence about the efficacy of work experience in general and of embedded work placements in particular (Blackwell et al, 2001, 270; also see Wilson, 2012). Further, that 'overwhelmingly, investigations have concluded that formal work placements bestow significant benefits on both the students and the firm'; advantages include easier transition into employment, a stronger vocational identity and increasing self confidence (Bennett, 2008, 105-106). In addition there is 'strong evidence to indicate that authentic work experience contextualises learning, has a strong influence on graduate employment, and should be integrated into course curricula wherever possible (Pegg et al, 2012, 45). Skills development has also been emphasised in terms of generic key skills of communication, team working and the development of 'social competencies'. 'Research on placements reinforces a concept of learning as a situated social activity involving development of social skills and management of social relations. Therefore, experiential learning can be empirically observed in the situated development of social competence—the ways of managing and building social relationships in a given context' (Murakani, et al, 2009, 15). Learning as a socially situated activity that places a person initially at the peripheral of a 'community of practice' has also been highlighted (Lave and Wenger, 1999), this process can inform our understanding of the student experience. However, a caveat is that WBL is 'potentially limiting if the opportunities provided by the workplace do not form a good match to learners' aspirations, suggesting that work-based programmes can be disempowering vis-à-vis conventional university learning by trapping the learner into an employer-driven or instrumental agenda' (Lester and Costley, 2010, 569).

WBL has also been critiqued in other ways; for example for the 'simplistic utilitarianism' that currently exists and the instrumentalist and 'rampant vocationalism where everything is subsumed to work' (Hyland, 2001, p.679; Boden and Nedeva, 2010). Increasingly, related policies are driven by national governments' neo-liberal agenda, with universities having to respond with a greater emphasis on acknowledging and accrediting

work-based learning, developing opportunities to increase the employability of their graduates, and monitoring trends in employment destinations for graduates; resulting in universities losing their independence and autonomy. There has been a growing discourse on the value and appropriateness of employability and work-based learning at the levels of both policy and practice (Boden and Nedeva, 2010; Cranmer 2006; Moreau and Leathwood, 2007). One conclusion is that there are a number of competing agendas relating to WBL; these include employer demands, the race for competitiveness, skills, training at the expense of a universal education, and government policy driven by 'a perceived need for the U.K. to compete internationally in order to survive as an economic power' (Foster and Stephenson, 1998, 156).

In addition to outlining the categories of WBL and discovering the advantages for students, there is also a discussion regarding relevant pedagogies that support students on WBL programmes and help them get the most out of their experience. It has been suggested that there are 'pedagogies for employment' (Pegg et al, 2012) with guides for practitioners and for those engaged in policy and practice. At the forefront is an assertion that students need to be active partners in the process and personal development planning is an important element. Pedagogies such as action learning and critical reflection underpin approaches to WBL. The corollary is that this moves away from didactic forms of teaching towards facilitation, potentially undermining the traditional role of the academic. Paradoxically, however, it has been noted that 'lecture-based teaching methods are still important in developing theoretical and abstract contextual knowledge' (Pegg et al, 2012, 32). This potentially creates tensions and a difficult 'transition' for students and teachers, with the implication that a challenge needs to be met in terms of different styles of delivery, curriculum content, and assessment (Yorke, 2010). Nevertheless, important factors of an effective programme of WBL include structure and a strong element of reflection (Smith et al, 2007; Pegg et al, 2012, 36). The quality of the work experience is important and needs to be an aid to the learning process that also has the potential to be transformative. For Blackwell et al (2001) it is 'the articulation of what has been learned that is the key. That, in turn, depends upon initial purposefulness and then upon regular reflection that involves others. Yorke (2010) picks up on the importance of metacognition to the 'pedagogical landscape' in ways that cover students' self-awareness and their ability to reflect, problem solve and self-regulate their learning. Further, a case is made to ensure that students undergo a 'deep learning' experience that includes reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Smith et al, 2007, 133). This assists the process of moving from surface to deep approaches to learning; a transformative approach to learning, rather than just 'working with meaning'. It can result in an 'upgrade' to learning that is not just about 'making sense' but 'making meaning' (Smith et al, 2007, p.134 and 139). However, these processes are not always evident; Murakani et al's research suggests that the placement experience is not always a 'change process' for students. 'This question of change and learning can pose a difficulty to some, if not all, especially when they were not given a set of criteria to measure change in the individual' (2009, 19).

Breaking down the taxonomies of placement even further, the focus of research could fall on many aspects of the placement experience; for example skills development (Crebert et al, 2004), the employment of critical reflection methods (Boud et al, 2004; Moon, 2005) and a range of other pedagogical tools, the format and delivery of academic support, career progression and student satisfaction more generally. The research presented here focuses on the value of placement to the student over a relatively shorter period of time underpinned by structured pedagogy and focussed outcomes. The findings will help readers consider ‘short project’ type WBL and the most suitable support mechanisms and pedagogies that underpin students’ experiences in meaningful ways that also support career progression.

### **Data collection methodology**

The standard format of collecting module feedback has many advantages, but is of limited use for exploring the student experience in more depth and limited when applied to modules that are more specialised in their delivery, such as incorporating an element of work-based learning. In order to acquire richer data, a research project was set up with a methodology designed to collect qualitative data on the value of the placement experience to students. The data collection method contained an element of pragmatism that combined quantitative and qualitative data techniques (Flick, 2008). The aim was to triangulate data that provided a snapshot of the student experience. Data was collected through an on-line survey that contained multi-choice questions, Likert scale responses and questions that encouraged open-ended responses in the students’ own words; building in a strong qualitative dimension. This dual approach to data collection allowed both ‘structure’ (quantitative) and ‘process’ (qualitative) features (Flick, 2008, 8) to be combined. In terms of structure, questions related mostly to issues surrounding delivery, content, and support in ways that took into account students’ responses quantitatively. The process approach related to the student experience in a qualitative way that allowed students’ voices to be heard in much more detail. The aim was to ‘invite an honest, personal comment from respondents’ the content of which might include ‘gems’ of information that would not otherwise be collected; (Cohen et al, 20011, 392).

The survey was conducted at the end of students’ placements, following the submission of their assignment. This removed a potential conflict of interest in terms of answering the survey in ways that students felt might help elicit a positive summative assessment result. Students’ responses were anonymised throughout the electronic survey in terms of both quantitative and qualitative responses. The questions were designed to collect a wide range of information relating to the students’ experiences on the module and in their chosen placement. A total of 180 full-time students were asked to complete the survey, all taking placement in the same academic year; of these 55 (31%) responded by completing the questions.

Students were asked to comment on the nature of their placement and their relationship with the host organisation, to what extent they had enjoyed their placement and

why, and how useful the placement experience was for them and their aspirations. Students were also asked about the mechanisms of support whilst in placement and what their preferences were in terms of support and delivery of the module. They were also asked to comment on to what extent their placement had influenced their career aspirations. Finally, students were asked about the module and general support whilst on placement and what they enjoyed most about their experience. One aim was to get an overview of the student experience, from which later research projects could investigate in much more detail specific aspects or themes relating to placement. Whilst outlining some quantitative statistics that represent an overview of students' placement destinations, this paper concentrates on the "process" aspect of placement, through an analysis of the open-ended qualitative data that enabled a deeper engagement with the feelings and experiences of students during placement. Qualitative analysis followed a Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss and Corbin, 1997; Babchuk, 1997; Haig, 1995; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This methodology commonly uses the process of data collection, note taking, coding, constant comparison, categorising, sampling and saturation. This involved making meaning from a range of data and emerging themes that gradually took on an increasingly structured and organised analysis. Units of analysis can include meanings, feelings, actions and events, (Cohen et al, 2011, 600); in this research they developed out of the day-to-day interactions and experiences that students accumulated. Categories were developed that represented emerging themes, connections made between them, and the results were compared to their relationship with extant literature. The aim was to achieve a level of saturation (where no new insights are produced), and enable a confident discussion of the data and how it relates to the theory and practice of placement and WBL.

## **Results**

The type of placements naturally reflected a range of different experiences. The most popular placement was Primary school (52.7%), followed by Early Years (20%). Secondary (9%), Further Education (4%), 'other educational organisation' and placements outside the education sector represented the final 14.3%. Participants were asked how useful the placement was in terms of gaining experience: over 94% thought the experience 'very useful' or quite useful; no-one found it 'not at all useful'. Students' qualitative feedback confirmed that the experience had been helpful for many in determining their career path or at least giving it more thought in terms of what they would like to pursue. For others, it was useful for developing knowledge and putting theory into practice, learning more about children and how they develop, as well as building up skills in the workplace. For a large proportion of students (almost everyone that responded), the placement provided a positive experience that helped them consider their career options more carefully.

Where appropriate open-ended qualitative responses were requested, enabling students to provide comments and observations in their own words. This resulted in 51 students providing 380 individual responses to the 14 questions that had this function. The students' personalised responses totalled over 6300 words on a range of different themes.

Such a response in some ways represents a substantial quantitative response. However, the aim was to build up a qualitative picture that provided a richer and more in-depth sense of students' feelings about their placement and the module delivery. Students were also given the opportunity to raise their own issues independently of the themes identified by the rest of the survey questions.

From the 'open coding' process (Cohen et al, 2011) the themes that emerged from the data were categorised in the following ways: comments that related to the daily life and routine of the organisation; the value of the interaction with both staff and pupils; gaining useful experience and developing knowledge; gaining confidence; worries and concerns about the placement; career prospects. At times, these categories were closely interlinked; for example students would discuss their growing confidence in general terms, but also with respect to their developing relationships with staff members in the organisation and with children. The knowledge gained from this process was also highlighted by students on regular occasions.

Respondents, more than anything else, commented upon being involved in the daily life of the placement organisation, 20% of students' comments specifically discussed how they fitted into routines and commented upon aspects of teaching, as well as getting to know both staff and pupils. Learning about the setting was of course important, but in particular being able to get to know staff members and being able to witness different teaching methods and different capabilities of students (for example those with a special education need) was deemed valuable. In addition, having a greater understanding of roles and responsibilities was important. The feeling of being part of a team and getting involved with colleagues was appreciated:

The staff were so helpful and constantly ensuring I was assisting in classrooms or teaching classes. I was asked to go back next year and volunteer over the summer

Getting to grips with what being a teacher would in fact be like. The teachers made my experience very positive and lovely which in return made me enjoy placement more.

Loved being part of a team. Included as a staff member. Knowing I have a direct role and involved within staff roles.

The simple act of, day-by-day, developing their communication skills and understanding (and therefore their confidence) was highlighted. Perhaps something of an oversight for many experienced practitioners, but this was an important aspect for those with little or no experience. Working alongside professional practitioners and being able to 'make connections' leading to 'future development' was regarded as very useful. Students enjoyed gaining greater insight and getting a clearer understanding of their chosen profession, achieving a greater sense of their career path and a broader knowledge of alternate career pathways. The combination of working alongside a professional team was clearly a rewarding experience.

It has made me aware of my own leadership skills and has raised my confidence.

Leading small activities. Communicating and helping children. Being with different ages. Joining in songs, games and activities.

Working alongside professionals... was a really enjoyable experience.

The above comments were quite typical, but some went into more detail and discussed their developing knowledge of working within specialised areas of the education profession. Strategies such as developing communication methods with young children, a better understanding of the curriculum, and gaining a diverse knowledge of educational concepts such as class streaming and differentiating the curriculum were highlighted. Occasionally students considered their studies in a way that articulated the links between theory and practice:

Putting the theory side into practice. Imagining myself in the same role as the professionals.

Putting learnt theory and knowledge from Uni into action at a setting is great. Implementing information and knowledge learnt in a practical way.

In addition, it was a chance to gain experience in a different setting and at different levels (Key Stages). This helped students accumulate a wider knowledge base and consider alternative career paths. The experience helped them to confirm the direction that their future career might take.

It was a chance to gain experience in a setting different to a primary school which is what I had been focusing on in the past. It gave me a chance to see what different jobs are out there working with children and their families and see if any other jobs would be ones I would consider in the future, rather than going into teaching so young.

Working in areas relating to special education needs, for example, encouraged them to think about the wider issues of inclusion and their role within the context of inclusion.

However, students also revealed their worries, uncertainties and what they did not enjoy about the experience. All 55 responded, although many (40%) suggested that there wasn't anything about the placement that they did not enjoy. The rest of the comments related to a variety of issues including a general lack of confidence and preparation:

I struggled with the lack of understanding with how to deal with some situations.

I felt inexperienced and unprepared at first which made me feel as though I was more of a hindrance than of help.

I had no experience in this type of setting and felt uncomfortable at first but over time I've really enjoyed being there and have learnt a lot.

It was not always a clear and linear progression, especially if confidence levels were not particularly high in the first place:

I did not enjoy the pressure of learning and doing new jobs. For example because I am not a very confident person I felt very stressed and unhappy when I was asked to do a job, which I did not understand fully.

There were a small number of negative comments about not being allowed to get involved as much as some students had hoped, a lack of organisation, or being given menial tasks to do. Other aspects students did not enjoy about their placement included: not being treated as a professional, being restricted to certain activities, not being able to get involved or being involved only in a limited way. Clearly, a balance needs to be struck between different tasks, obligations and expectations in terms of the student, the placement provider and in meeting the demands of the module and the assessment criteria. Such experiences were not typical but suggest that more help could be directed in assisting those who lacked confidence. This might include ways that enable them to engage much more quickly, build confidence and get the most out of their placement. However, the benefits generally outweighed the disadvantages and for the most part students appeared to increasingly value their experience and the chance to add to their knowledge:

I learned so much about myself as a person, while making some great contacts.

A thread that ran through was the confidence acquired, even from a relative short placement period; 23% of the responses related to confidence and the opportunity to increase their experience through a hands-on approach. Students acknowledged the importance of the experience they had gained in terms of how it would help them obtain employment. Students spoke in terms of becoming increasingly confident in working with children, but also with teachers and discovering what teaching is actually like:

I learnt how to be more confident also learnt how to use different strategies to get children involved in group activities.

I feel it has given me the confidence to believe that I can work with children and their families.

I have built up a good relationship with my supervisor and I would use her as a reference. The experience will allow me to offer lots of practical examples and personal experiences.

A journey took place very quickly, from being uncertain and feeling inexperienced and unprepared, to a growing realisation of their abilities that resulted in increased levels of confidence by the end of the placement. Experience and confidence became inextricably linked:

Experience and total confidence that i want to pursue a career in teaching primary school.

I learnt how to be more confident also learnt how to use different strategies to get children involved in group activities.

I feel it has given me the confidence to believe that I can work with children and their families.

Students were asked to reflect with respect to how the placement experience might be useful in informing their career prospects. Of the 52 who responded, 46% felt that the placement was significant in influencing their projected career paths. Another 37% felt that it had a slight effect. As one student put it:

I believe it was very useful because now I know what to expect next time I enter a facility like this again and I will be able to apply the skills I learnt in the placement to other real life settings.

Some were still unsure of what they wanted to do in the future, but for many this relatively short placement served to confirm their desire to continue within the field of education; over 71% of the 52 that answered a question on this theme felt that the experience had been essential or had helped greatly in terms of their application to do a teacher training course, should they choose to apply. One student's comments in some ways represented a spread of responses that showed a flexible standpoint:

I am still considering teaching as a career but with so many options opening up through this course I am unsure which route I am going to take.

The evidence suggests that this 'short project' placement experience is important in helping students deliberate on what their next career move may be. More detailed research is needed to elaborate on this process and could help inform and support students in their decision-making, career choices, and the pedagogical tools applied by practitioners in support of this process.

Some students also viewed the placement and career prospects in quite strategic ways that helped build their social capital; suggesting that they would now be able to get useful references or build up their c.v. The following response in many ways summed up many students' thoughts:

Before doing this placement, teaching was all I had ever considered but I know how competitive it is and that sometimes going into it young is not the best decision. Getting experience in another setting has opened my eyes to just how many professions there are that help children and their families and has helped me considered other professions I could do if I do not decide to do my P.G.C.E. straight after my degree.

Students were asked to name the most important aspect of the module that supported them in their placement. Two thirds of respondents chose either; more lectures, formulating a set of objectives through the Action Plan; or writing reflective diaries, with responses evenly distributed across all three categories. A related question asked students what they wished to

see more of in terms of supporting their placement. By far the most popular open-ended response corresponded to the provision of more traditional forms of delivery and support. More than anything else, students (18 out of 52 responses) commented that they would prefer either more lectures, smaller group seminars, more discussion with lecturers, more group work and tutor meetings. This theme substantiates Pegg's conclusion (2012) that lecture-based teaching still has an important role to play and that any transition away from this can sometimes be problematic; other comments varied across a diverse range of issues. Finally, students were given the opportunity to raise issues of their own. This question elicited only 17 responses that were both very generalised and wide-ranging. Whilst difficult to categorise, the general tone was that students had enjoyed their placement and would have liked to have accumulated more hours; at least two commented that they are returning to the organisation to follow up on their initial experience.

## **Discussion**

The data revealed a wealth of information about students' experiences and views on their placement that standard module feedback does not pick up on. To a large extent it suggested that students achieved a meaningful and productive experience from a relatively short period of placement. A question that remains from this research, however, is to what extent can the lessons learned on this programme of education-related work-based learning be transposed to other subject disciplines and vocations? It could be argued that education settings are by their very nature focussed and narrow; appealing to very specific interests. They would be exposing themselves to particular skills sets, knowledge, competencies and experiences that enable them to effectively engage, even with a short period of placement, because of its close alignment to their chosen study. It is therefore reasonable to ask might a Business Studies or Engineering Studies student, for example, get as much out of this type of short project and self-contained work experience programme? Such a question is based upon an assumption that students in other subject disciplines might be in a placement environment that is far more heterogeneous in its scope and demands; rendering a short-term placement less effective in terms of generating a meaningful and coherent experience. Whilst further research or comment is welcomed in terms of this hypothesis, the conclusion of this project is that certain approaches utilised within this placement module are capable of being transferred to other subject areas in ways that sustain and provide focus during a short project placement. For example blending the placement experience with a suite of provision that includes the full range of formal lectures, on-line learning and tutorials will appeal to the student. In addition, setting clear objectives for professional development provide a focus to even relatively short placements. Furthermore, the application of theories of critical reflection and reflective diaries will help students consider their professional and personal development whilst on placement within a socially situated context that also aids the metacognitive process, irrespective of the type of work they are asked to become involved with. In other words an approach that develops the students' "softer skills" such as their emotional intelligence, communication skills and ability to work as a team for example, can be explored; in addition

to exercising their subject-based knowledge and application of it. This provides focus and structure to the experience in ways that can make it a more meaningful experience.

In addition, it could be argued that there is a danger that such a short period of experiential learning, in whatever subject discipline, may not reach its potential value if the placement lacks focus or the duties expected or objectives sought from the experience are not entirely clear. The type of short-period placement in this study seemed to benefit students partly as a result of its structured approach. This was exemplified in a number of ways, but especially with respect to the Action Plan that students needed to complete. When asked what was particularly useful support whilst on placement, the Action Plan came a close second to writing reflective diaries. The Plan consisted of two clear objectives (one knowledge-based, one skills-based) that students were required to critically reflect upon; the module is underpinned by theories of reflection. Furthermore, students were expected to keep a critically reflective diary. In their survey responses, students valued reflective diaries higher than any other support mechanism. The provision of an extensive accompanying hand book was also rated as a useful tool. It is worth considering that, whatever the type of placement, a directed and structured approach to the work experience that is also assessed and credit-bearing, is particularly beneficial and could be transferred to other settings and subject areas. It is helpful in shaping a work-based experience that has demonstrable value to students. It is 'the articulation of what has been learned that is the key. That, in turn, depends upon initial purposefulness and then upon regular reflection that involves others. It is enhanced where students are used to thinking metacognitively' (Blackwell et al, 2001, 282). 'Professional jobs (graduate-level jobs in particular) require the application of metacognition in various ways, and hence a strong case can be made that the teaching approach adopted should foster it' (Yorke 2010, 42). Applying theories of reflection and the development and monitoring of an Action Plan were pedagogies designed to articulate a metacognitive process that helped students move from surface to deeper learning. 'Moving from surface to deep approaches to learning; a transformative approach to learning, rather than just 'working with meaning'... can result in an 'upgrade' to learning' (Smith et al, 2007, 134 and 139).

Students' comments on the significance of engaging in their placement environment are also a reminder of the importance of learning as a situated and social activity. It was clear that social networking and building social capital came into play as an important by-product of the WBL experience, resulting in the opportunity to seek references and make 'some great contacts'; even if this might represent the 'simplistic utilitarianism' that Hyland (2001) suggested. It is also important to remember that on placement students can often be placed at the peripheral (Lave and Wenger, 1991) of the situated learning experience; some students will adapt well and still derive much benefit within this context, whilst others may find such a position uncomfortable. Closely tailored advice and guidance before placement begins would be helpful in preparing students for any number of situations they might find themselves in and respond quickly; potentially important within a short project context. Advice and guidance will help students who find themselves placed in experiences that were unexpected or undertaking duties that do not match their expectations and objectives, possibly affecting their confidence or self-respect. Paradoxically, advice and guidance should be available to

help students who find themselves taking on responsibilities that are above their level of experience and qualifications and which may demand different kinds of support. Tutorials present appropriate and obvious opportunities to provide guidance, but a more structured approach would look to blend support through different formats such as workshops, seminars, on-line delivery and formative activities. Despite some negative experiences, especially at the start of placement, evidence suggested that the large majority of students in the sample were able to build and manage important social and professional relationships (Murakani, et al, 2009) within the context of a 'short project' timeframe.

Building confidence was a recurring theme throughout and became interwoven with other themes such as acquiring experience and knowledge, building professional relationships and understanding. 'Putting theory into practice' helped students apply aspects of their theoretical studies in ways that brought important topics to life, such as inclusion. Structuring these processes with action plans, objectives and learning diaries helped provide direction and there was a sense that students became active partners in the process. Whilst some-what subjective, throughout the data one could identify a growing realisation from students of their abilities, resulting in increased levels of confidence: 'I learned so much about myself as a person'.

There were many advantages to supporting experiential learning delivered through a blended approach that included formative exercises, on-line activities and learning diaries; but despite this it was clear that many students still preferred a significant amount of contact through the more traditional delivery of lectures and seminars. Whilst it has been suggested that placement represents a move away from traditional forms of teaching to facilitation, there has been some acknowledgement that 'Lecture-based teaching methods are still important in developing theoretical and abstract contextual knowledge' (Pegg, 2012, 32). This research confirms that students still value highly this approach. Within the context of a 'short project' placement, students regard it as highly beneficial if there is a significant element of face-to-face contact with academic staff, formalised as part of a teaching programme. Pegg suggests that the move from traditional didactic teaching methods to facilitation and coaching can be a difficult 'transition' for students; feedback from students in this research appears to corroborate this view; however, lecturers may still need to carefully 'rethink' their pedagogical approaches, assessments and curriculum (York, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

Small qualitative samples clearly have their limitations, especially in terms of extrapolation; however, through a process of constant comparison, the researcher considered a level of saturation (where no new insights are produced) to have been achieved, and therefore this enabled a relatively confident discussion of the implications of the data and how they relate to the theory and practice of placement and WBL. This research concurs with Wilson (2009) who concludes that useful WBL does take place over shorter time periods and can be of significant benefit to Higher Education students. In terms of employment and

employability, students have highlighted the social capital they have acquired within the networks they have established within a relatively short period. It is perhaps too ambitious to claim that students have undergone a major transformational experience as suggested by Mezirow (1991), but the evidence has shown a potential for this. Whilst Murakani observes that such experiences are not always a 'change process', the structured Action Plan and with reflective theory underpinning the experience, it does allow the student to consider to what extent change has happened through a carefully selected 'set of criteria' (Murakani et al, 2009, 19). The experience can either cement career ambitions in terms of affirming their original choice of career trajectory, or modify their aspirations. Bennet (2008) notes that placement can provide easier transitions into employment or establish a stronger vocational identity; this certainly seems to have been the case with respondents. The data in this research shows that students valued very highly even relative short, but focussed, placements as a way of gaining very valuable experience and providing direction and affirmation of their projected career. It has been argued that there needs to be 'clear and associated continuation of this positive, experiential learning into the final year of study' (Pegg et al 2012, 36). Perhaps more could be done to articulate this; examples might include how students apply research methodologies, ethical dimensions to the working environment, and how the placement experience could provide an opportunity to undertake some small scale research as part of their final year dissertation project. This would provide clear and strong applied and pragmatic strands right through undergraduates' academic careers, whilst other modules present theoretical underpinnings. Others are exploring how elements of placement and professional development are presented throughout an undergraduate course and have discussed the challenges of such an approach (Byrom and Aiken, 2014). It is important that the short project placement is carefully designed to maximise students' experiential learning and metacognitive processes, but also in ways that articulate with the rest of the course.

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WORD COUNT = 7850 (Including Abstract)