From unskilled to employable: using a qualitative examination of the 'Placement Timeline Research Method' to explore student professional and personal development whilst on multiple WIL experiences.

Abstract

This paper explores the method and findings of a qualitative examination into multiple work integrated learning (MWIL) placements. The research consisted of 14 reflective interviews with students from across discipline areas who had undertaken a series of work placements. The range of MWIL experiences included professional placements in nursing and youth work, yearlong placements in accountancy and engineering, self-directed WIL experiences in arts, informal and part-time placements.

The aim of this study was to explore the transitions that took place throughout multiple placements that helped the student to become a work ready and an effective professional. A research method, 'Placement Timeline' was developed. This allows a reflective structure for the researcher to tease out skill development and work readiness. All interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo qualitative software.

The paper will discuss selected findings from the research. These provide insights into how multiple WIL experiences may benefit students in their preparation for work. In effect it was as if the work readiness and skills relating to an uncertain and ever changing job market skills were fast tracked over MWIL. This research highlights the key transitional features of MWIL.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

Models of WIL

In the UK the predominant model of WIL has been the sandwich degree, where periods of work experience are 'sandwiched' inside academic studies, the most common form being a third year in industry within a four year degree. Anecdotal evidence shows that in the UK this model works well in business, engineering, science, IT

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and art and design. Models for WIL in professional placements are often highly prescribed by the accrediting professional body each with its individual approach strictly enforced across the sector in areas such as nursing, social work and teaching. They tend to fit into the Multiple Work Integrated Learning (MWIL) model, with several shorter placements and different host organisations. WIL experiences are tightly linked to the outcomes, skills and competencies expected of the trainee professional.

The above two models predominate at our University and across the UK. Our University's strategy map (University of Huddersfield, 2013a) has a core aim of inspiring 'employable and enterprising graduates'. This is backed up by a Key Performance Indicator of being Top 10% amongst mainstream English Universities in the annual Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) Survey. Furthermore our Teaching and Learning Strategy (University of Huddersfield, 2013b) states, 'all courses to have work related elements'. So whilst we offer sandwich and professional WIL experiences there are other options. For example on courses such as Youth and Community Studies, placements can be continual throughout the course, so every week students may both go to work and attend University. On courses such as History and Politics, students may undertake a six week placement to gain an insight into the world of work, which may not be inside a 'traditional' business.

Background Research

An international project led by Drysdale (Drysdale et al., 2011) examined the relationship between WIL and the psychological variables believed to play a role for success in the transition to the labor market. More specifically, self-concept, self-efficacy, hope, procrastination, tacit knowledge, and study skills/work ethic were examined in a cross-sectional design with participation in WIL as the independent variable. Our research team based at a UK university participated in the project and has contributed data to the wider cross country study. The research survey collected a large amount of data, which will be referred to as our first phase quantitative study (Purdie et al., 2013).

Background Findings from First Phase Quantitative Study Relating to MWIL

The extant evidence (Allen & van der Velden, 2002; Crebert *et al*., 2002; Cuzzi *et al.*, 1996) already shows that like our students, those who pursue WIL have significantly higher hope and confidence in attaining their goals and lower test anxiety than their non-WIL peers. However, our UK based first phase quantitative study further revealed some interesting findings relating to MWIL. The study looked at the number of MWIL experiences, including both formal WIL and informal WIL such as volunteering. Our results suggested that the more MWIL experiences a student had the higher their trait hope, agency, self-concept, self-esteem and academic self-efficacy were (Purdie et al., 2011). Yet our findings do contrast with previous evidence which suggests there are no significant differences in self-efficacy between students who pursue sandwich placements (one full year of WIL on a four year degree) and those who pursue multiple placements (Cuzzi *et al.*, 1996). Our findings suggested that students' emotions and cognitions are more strongly affected by WIL than their academic behaviours. This is consistent with previous evidence to suggest that an improvement in student's confidence is a key outcome of WIL (Cope, 2000; Ward, 2009).

To allow for detailed follow up of our first phase quantitative study, the UK team secured funding for a second phase follow-up study. This study is a qualitative study aimed to explore student perception of the placement experiences in more depth, by taking an overarching view of MWIL across multiple academic schools and WIL models in a UK University.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

The Qualitative Project

Many existing qualitative studies of student work experience are discipline-specific, focusing on fields such as nursing (McKenna et al., 2010), occupational therapy (Fieldhouse & Fedden, 2009), applied science (Coll et al., 2001) and information technology (Holt et al., 2004). One important focus for our qualitative project was to maintain an overview of the features of WIL across a variety of diverse degree programmes, rather than focusing on role-specific elements of WIL. This set some challenges in terms of the research design, with implications across three stages of the project: recruitment, interviewing and analysis.

The project aimed to investigate broad aspects of learning and personal development, and the students' sense of progression across WIL experiences, rather than comparing task-specific aspects of job roles. Recruitment of participants across a range of subject areas is crucial to forming insights into issues common across disciplines. The survey aimed to have representation from across all academic schools. Initially participants were drawn from our phase one quantitative study who had expressed an interest in contributing to follow up research. However detailed reviews of the data showed subject areas where no volunteers could either be found, or chose not to take up our invitation. This resulted in communications with staff to help to recruit students allowing for a variety of experiences to be explored.

The research team for phase one of the project (a quantitative exploration of the area) consisted of the core research team with expertise in employability, quantitative and qualitative research methods retrospectively plus a part-time research assistant. For phase two of the project (an in-depth, qualitative, exploration of the area), the same core team were in place, but with a different part-time research assistant. This was due in part to the different nature of research method, but more pertinently as the first research assistant had found a permanent post elsewhere.

Developing Qualitative Research Tools

We initially considered using focus groups for data collection, but the practicalities of organising them from students across Schools and subjects led us to move to individual interviews. A first pilot interview was undertaken using Kelly's repertory grid technique (Fransella, 2005). This method has its roots in personal construct psychology (PCP) (Kelly, 1955), and is an approach which investigates how individuals make sense of their world and their identity. The participant was asked to think about the work characteristics of colleagues on placements, and to think about his/her own characteristics in terms of his/her work role at different points along his/her placement journey. Comparative talk about the characteristics of the self and others in the work environment did elicit fundamental perceptions about what made people employable, and easy or difficult to

work with, but few links were made between these characteristics and specific experiential episodes on work placements, and the technique drew little talk about the relational aspects of working with others.

The Placement Timeline Researcher's Tool

Reflecting upon the limitations of the repertory grid for this project, another PCP technique focusing on aspects of personal development – the Salmon Line (King & Horrocks, 2010) was considered. This technique uses a single line drawn between two opposite poles of a construct – for example, looking at how girls view design technology, Salmon (2003) used a line with the poles "very low ability" and "greatest possible ability" to facilitate reflection on how progression could occur from one end to the other. With this as our starting point we developed the Placement Timeline Tool, explicitly capturing the temporal aspects of learning from multiple placements. Participants were presented with a line drawn along a large sheet of paper, with poles labelled 'Before placements' and 'After placements'. (Note the UK term 'placement' is often used interchangeably with the international term of WIL experiences used in this article.) The participant was asked to denote work placements underneath the line and key moments in learning and personal development above the line at the points in the placement journey at which they occurred. In a second pilot interview, this proved to be successful in eliciting data addressing the project's aims of discovering how the student's perceived skills and attitudes to work developed over time. The project team agreed that this approach, the 'Placement Timeline Research Tool' should be used in our research.

The Placement Timeline was used in 14 individual interviews, with a wide range of participants, across diverse subject areas, who have all had MWIL experiences. A positive challenge was managing the complexity of interview material. Due to high levels of engagement, the participants spoke at length about their experiences. This resulted in lengthy transcription and significantly higher transcription costs than expected. However the resulting quality and quantity of data has provided a rich dataset for this and future work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic Analysis

The principles of thematic analysis are based on looking for patterns within the data. Analysis can go beyond describing a set of data by interpreting the themes or patterns which arise in connection with specific research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Our qualitative analysis focused on investigating student experiences of multiple WIL and their influence on learning, personal development, and preparation for work.

An in-depth thematic analysis of the interviews was carried out based on the principles of template analysis (King, 2012). Template analysis is a technique which can accommodate an *a priori* focus on specific aspects of the research agenda – in this case, on the overarching issues connected with learning and personal development which are shared by students across diverse subject areas. Template analysis involves the development of a coding structure (a template) from initial interview transcripts which is then applied to subsequent interview data and modified as new insights into the data are acquired. The initial template was constructed with a main focus on overall issues, rather than the task-based concepts connected with specific job roles, and this resulting focus was taken forward in the analysis of subsequent data. The technique is flexible enough to allow for the inclusion of issues related to job roles where they may have a bearing on several issues at a later stage: details can be coded as low level themes in a coding hierarchy, and can be subsumed under higher level themes as the analysis progresses. An added benefit of this technique in team-based research is the possibility of sharing analysis and preliminary findings at an early stage, when the initial template has been constructed, and keeping the team updated with information each time the coding structure is revised. NVivo was used to facilitate this approach.

Initial Results

The thematic analysis produced four main themes, each with a variety of subsidiary themes at several levels: 'making the transformation', 'personal identity', 'student identity', and 'professional identity'. While distinct, these themes of course inter-relate in complex ways for individual participants; however, the overall thematic

structure suggests it may be useful to look at personal and student identities as shaping the nature of the transformation experience, which in turn helps develop their sense of professional identity.

Below we will focus on a key sub-theme taken from each of the four themes, providing an insight into the overall findings.

Making the Transformation and Reflection

The transformation the student undergoes on multiple placements emerged as the key theme. Being able to anchor the self was a core value which was needed again and again through each placement. Transitions were also characterised by experiential evolution and the chance to practice, observe and try new things. Particular gains could be made by linking theory to practice. This allowed for comparisons of different work situations and personal growth to be made during the reflection process. The student's own performance was also considered, particularly with respect to the role and context of environment.

During the thematic analysis a prominent sub-theme of 'Making the transformation' was 'Making comparisons'; we will focus here on a subsidiary of this: 'reflection'. It has been selected to amplify this theme as it demonstrates not only how comparisons are made, but also how this facilitates the transformation in professional identity to take place. It was interesting to see how reflection on placement was integrated with the educational experience of reflection, and more specifically how this skill was perceived to have developed over time.

The accounts from participants 6 and 4 show how placement experience is seen to transform students' understandings of reflection: 'Having the placement out just sort of has allowed me to sort of take a step back from education and rather than constantly thinking education, just think about sort of myself, you know, like what positives I've got, what negatives, what can I do to get a lot better and that's just sort of how I'll and once I step back into education, I've improved, you know, certain aspects of myself and I'll be able to sort of give it a really good go.' Participant 6 – Accountancy and Finance

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'Like reflective practice and in my first year I hated it because I just saw it as a bind. But my second and particularly my third year, I found them really cathartic and I found the reflections really [helped me in] how I can process what's happened to me on a day to day basis on placements and trying to make sense of, you know.' Participant 4 - Nursing.

MWIL seems to help students develop their reflection skills. Each WIL opportunity provides a new change to reflect, compare and contrast and ultimately make the transition. The opportunity for reflection is fast tracked as with each new experience there is a new opportunity for reflection.

Personal Identity and a Sense of Progress

'Personal identity' refers to the students' sense of who they are beyond those aspects of self that they see as directly associated with being a student. It was notable that many participants explicitly or implicitly made the point that they did not start their MWIL experience as a "blank slate"; they came with relevant experiences from before and outside of their studies. As they accumulated WIL experiences this too impacted on their view of themselves, and not just in professional or academic terms. Related to this, another interesting sub-theme was 'Sense of progress' and we will illustrate this below. Looking back on their WIL experiences, participants noted how they had changed personally. For example, the progression from auxiliary nurse to staff nurse is described by Participant 4 – Nursing.

'I work holistically which I never did before as an auxiliary, but again, you don't do because you don't know what it's like to be a staff nurse, so you don't get, I don't really think you have that holistic sort of thing in your head. I think you are very task orientated because it's like "right - we've got ten people to wash, so we'll wash all these ten people". Whereas as a staff nurse, you sort of look at everything else. Erm, I think I'm a lot more chilled because I used to get, I used to get my hair off as an auxiliary. I wasn't impatient, but again, it's just that, it's that lack of knowledge and lack of understanding I think, yeah, I've just, it's quite, when you sort of think back, its only three years, but I think it has got to be three years for a reason, because you've to get in all different placements.'

'[She [work colleague] always ignored me, she never ever asked me my name, never, she never even made eye contact with me, that's how, that's how nasty she was, I feel that she was that nasty and when I was reading back at it, it made me think oh my god, I could have dealt with that, now I can deal with that, I'll just go straight up and say hello to her myself.'

Participant 1 – Early Years. This shows how the student was able to see the personal growth and confidence develop over her MWIL.

Similarly, Participant 6 – Accountancy and Finance – relates how he felt he had matured through WIL experience:

'I've just sort of, I've got a real sort of hunger to learn more things now and I'm just sort of reading a lot more and I think when I feel I come back to uni, I'm really going to be in my element, that I sort of feel I've grown up a lot and I'll be able to just sort of go into it and analyse everything and plan everything, which I don't think I would have been able to do a year ago.'

However, occasionally a bad placement experience could have a negative impact on the student – at least in the immediate aftermath:

'I wanted it to be an experience that changed me, but in a good way, not in a bad way and it changed me in a bad way. I became somebody that I didn't really know because I was tired, I was fed up, I was like really just angry and you know, unwell, under the weather, I was just everything that nobody likes to be, you know.'

Participant 7 – Textile Crafts

This really summarises the whole experience well; MWIL is about growing up. It really is essential to be grown up to be a professional. Again the process of MWIL demonstrates the fast tracking nature of this.

Student Identity – a Colleague or a Student?

Many participants expressed concerns about how they were seen whilst on placements by members of the organisation they were working with. While some felt they were regarded just as a 'spare pair of hands', others felt accepted and treated as part of the team. This could vary between placements for individual participants.

The majority of comments described positive experiences regarding the way they were viewed within placement organisations, as the following two quotes demonstrate:

'They're all very sort of, you know they're all very, you know, they buy me stuff for Christmas and things. They actually treat you like, erm, they're not like you would think, that there is like a system where you have the manager and then it's not very hierarchical, which is something that I like. Everyone's treated equally, erm,

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no-one's time is worth less than somebody else's and no-one is sort of seen to be more important because of their position, which I think, you know, I think that's really good in that sense.'
Participant 3 – History and Politics

'[They] made students equal to staff, so they are staff members, they attend all staff meetings with us. There's certain things, like safeguarding and confidential stuff …apart from that, they're involved in everything. ...But parents don't need to, obviously they just think that's our colleague and they're going with us. But I think it's really important, the way that people are addressed. For us, when I was at the school, it was just all, 'The student over there', and I just think hmmm, I just didn't like it, it wasn't for me.'
Participant 1 – Early Years

However, not everyone was treated in this way on every occasion, as participant 9 – Podiatry recalls:
'Some podiatrists were really happy and very informative as a supervising podiatrist. Others, I got the feeling like they were like oh, we've got a student with us again, I'm going to be late and fair enough, we often did make them run late because we had questions to ask or some of them, I learnt very quickly, when to ask questions and perhaps not when they were treating, I'd wait until afterwards. But again, it depended on the podiatrist, so that was a learning curve as well.'

Overall the growth and development can clearly been seem over MWIL. The boost to confidence of being treated as a colleague rather than a student had a major impact on
participant 2 – Youth and Community Studies:
'I basically got ten thousand pounds worth of funding to go sailing for ten days, which was amazing-…they treated me as a colleague rather than a young person, I was actually a volunteer on that trip rather than a young person, so that built my confidence because I was like well if I can do it with the kids back home, I can definitely use these skills somewhere else.'

Becoming a Professional and Finding Your Place
Becoming a professional is for many the ultimate aim of the WIL experience. For students on multiple WIL experiences they are developing towards being a professional in a range of environments. They start to philosophies of work, how the organisations fit and compare the various settings. Each new placement involves finding your place and building up of knowledge and systems of how things work. The student develops the skills needed to be employable as professional. Finding your place in the professional world raises interesting questions. What is it that the placement experience has taught you about the kind of professional you want to be? Therefore finding your place is the subtheme to explore to demonstrate the wider theme.

'I knew where my heart wanted to go, I just knew that I wanted to be at the children's centre and not at the school, and then I had to tell the head teacher that "I'm really sorry, I've made my mind up and I'm going with the other one".'
Participant 1 – Early Years

'Well I wouldn't have picked a degree lightly without thinking about it and I did guess that I wanted to be an accountant, but it's sort of certain experiences. I mean accounting is such a broad field, there's so many stuff to go into that I mean I still don't really know what I want to do now, but this [placement] has sort of been one experience that I've thought yeah, you know, this is definitely something that I want to do for the rest of my career.'
Participant 6 – Accountancy and Finance

'I think just the main thing that I really know now is that this is something that I do actually want to do, that I have enjoyed my placement year so far and that I do definitely want to make a career out of it.'
Participant 6 – Accountancy and Finance

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to explore the transitions that took place throughout multiple placements that helped the student to see themselves as a work-ready and an effective professional. The development of the new 'Placement Timeline Research Tool' proved to be very helpful in eliciting the kinds of reflective accounts needed to meet our objectives. Our findings are helping to unlock what is happening with MWIL. The journey demonstrated thorough personal and student identity, throughout transition and out to being ready to be a professional has been clearly articulated.

This qualitative study has provided insights into what may be happening in MWIL experiences, congruent with the possible benefits suggested in our earlier survey. Over the coming months, as a team of researchers we will analyse in more depth the timeline interview data that we have collected, and from which we have presented these initial findings. We look forward to sharing more of our work in the future.

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